

# **A Book Of Five Strings** ***Strategies for mastering the art of old time banjo***

**By Patrick Costello**



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-Patrick Costello

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# **A Book Of Five Strings** ***Strategies for mastering the art of old time banjo***

**By Patrick Costello**

For Miss Trudy

*The closest thing to an angel ever to waltz a puppy down Potomac Street.*

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# Introduction

When somebody asks me where I learned to improvise on the banjo the first thought that pops into my head is my mother. Mom doesn't play the banjo. She does play the dulcimer and she sings. Her voice is so pretty that I've seen road-weary country guitar pickers break into tears listening to her sing an old hymn, but she never was interested in the banjo.

I know, right about now you're wondering how somebody who never touched a banjo taught me how to play. Well, Mom never taught me anything technical about the banjo, but she did show me how to see the world around me.

When I was growing up she could take absolutely nothing and find a way to turn it into something. A pack of construction paper might turn the living room floor into a giant board game. Some Queen Anne's lace pressed between the pages of an old phone book would become amazing Christmas tree ornaments that, to my eyes, put the fancy displays at Longwood Gardens to shame. A reading of Robert Frost's "The Witch Of Coos" on a stormy night could turn our home into a haunted mansion more exciting than anything Disney could dream up.

I used to watch her piece together intricate quilts from fabric scraps. She would also spin raw wool into yarn and then send me into the woods to gather the plants used for making colorful natural dyes. She encouraged me to paint, draw and explore every creative idea that came into my head as long as I didn't blow up the kitchen. It was an environment where improvising was an everyday fact of life.

When I started studying karate the habit of thinking outside the box that I had picked up from Mom wound up being a pretty big asset.

One of the concepts Ed Parker built into his Kenpo Karate system was that it made more sense to learn one movement and then look at twenty-four ways to use that movement than to learn twenty-four individual movements.

I took to that idea like a duck to water. One of my instructors would show me a block or a strike and I would spend days or even weeks looking for ways to blend it into what I already knew. I looked for opportunities to utilize and incorporate the technique.

It was Ed Parker himself who pointed out to me that these ideas could be applied to learning a musical instrument. It's too long a story to tell here, but to sum it up I was sitting on the curb waiting for my ride after a martial arts seminar. It turned out that the guy I was sitting next to was none other than Ed Parker. We wound up chatting for a little while and he asked me what I wanted to "do" with my life. I wasn't even thirteen at the time. All I could do was shrug and say that maybe I would stay with karate, but I wasn't sure.

He just laughed and said that what I had learned up to this point and the way I had been taught could be applied to anything I wanted. Even music.

I perked up at that for a second, but it sounded too crazy. I couldn't see how that made any sense. How is learning to fight the same as learning to play music, or anything else?



When I asked him that he just gave me a big smile and patted me on the shoulder as if I already knew the answer. By then other people started coming around seeking his attention and that was that

When I started playing the banjo I realized pretty quickly that the big picture boiled down to learning how to play the basic "bump dit-ty" strum while changing chords. Everything else involved was nothing more than the application and expansion of that basic skill set. This meant I could take the training concepts I had picked up in the karate dojo and apply them to the banjo.

The old timers I met agreed with me about the frailing stroke being the core technique of the style, but they also stressed the importance of rhythm. "It's the rhythm, kid. That's got to stay the same no matter what happens"

They also pointed out something that I like to jokingly refer to as the number one rule of folk music: "If you are in the rhythm of the song and following the chord progression it's hard to hit a wrong note."

Armed with this information I was able to get to work and start building up my chops. I wasn't mimicking the playing of another banjo player by trying to memorize the individual finger movements of a repertoire list. I was applying the basic skills and discovering my own voice as I went along. I wound up blending the discipline of my martial arts training with the sense of creative freedom my mother had instilled in me when I was growing up.

In this book we are going to take a look at these concepts and talk about how you can develop a personalized practice routine and skill set that you can use to "free up" your banjo playing in jam sessions and solo performances.

Come on, grab your banjo and let's get to work.

# About Your Banjo

I don't want to get too wrapped up in banjo setup here because if you are reading this book I am assuming that you have been playing for at least a little while and you probably already have things set to your liking.

There is a current popular trend to set up "old time" banjos with a high action and a soft or plunky tone. That could make a good many of the techniques presented here more difficult than they really need to be.

How you set up your banjo is entirely up to you. It is, after all, your banjo. That said, when it comes to choosing equipment for a journey you want think logically rather than emotionally. You don't want to select the walking shoe with a popular brand logo over one that actually fits and functions.

My preferred setup is fairly simple. I use light gauge banjo strings with an adjustable tailpiece cranked down to keep the strings under a fair amount of tension. The action is set extremely low and the head is tightened so that the feet of the bridge don't sink into the head. With this setup I am able to get a wide range of tone and volume out of the instrument without any wasted effort on my part.

If you find yourself having to really slam down on the strings with your picking hand to get volume or if fretting requires excessive effort then my advice would be to think seriously about updating your setup. You have enough challenges to deal with without making your banjo difficult to play.

# Practice, Perspective & Speed

Before we dive into the core techniques of old time banjo I think we should take a moment to talk about three very important issues that are front and center with new players.

## Practice

The mistake people make when it comes to practice is that they either make it too much of an issue or treat it as work. When we sit down to practice and tell ourselves, "I must attain this" or, "I am doing something important" our heads get so full of judgments and opinions that there isn't any room for anything else. The will to achieve or prove something winds up working against us.

When you sit down to practice don't worry about playing this tune or that melody perfectly. As you will see later on in this book the melody of a song is actually the easiest and most flexible part of the equation. Once you "get" old time banjo the odds are pretty good that you will never play a song exactly the same way twice.

Instead, focus your attention on fundamentals such as the frailing strum, chord changes and other basic techniques. Work on these faithfully for a short period of time every day. Then stop worrying about practicing or gaining anything. Just play your banjo and sing some songs.

Don't treat this like work. Take joy in it.

## Perspective

I run into people all the time who make the mistake of deciding that they will never reach a certain level of skill before they ever strike a note. I don't think I have to explain how detrimental this kind of attitude can be to someone's progress.

The thing we sometimes forget is that the notion of success and failure really depends on your perspective. What might seem like a minimal achievement to one person could be a great success in the eyes of someone else.

Judging yourself against other people is always going to leave you feeling inadequate in some way or another. I'm a good banjo player and I love what I do, but if I compared my achievements and training to that of a concert violinist I could start to feel inadequate. What we forget is that the violinist in question may also be comparing himself or herself to somebody else. Don't be distracted from your own personal journey by falling into this trap. Allow the learning process to work.

It's the same kind of thing when a beginner compares himself or herself to an experienced banjo player. Seeing someone perform with what appears to be effortless skill when you are struggling with the basics can leave you feeling like you will never be able to get that far.

What we forget in that situation is that even the greatest banjo player in the world was at one time a beginner. What you are seeing is the end result of a lifetime spent making music. If you really think about

it the only thing a hot picker really has on you is time.

Be yourself. You are not lacking in anything. You may at times feel that you are not measuring up to someone else but when that happens all you have to do is change your perspective. Look at your progress from a rational point of view. Ask yourself if you really know the whole story or if you are just making excuses.

Trust me, if all you can ever do is sing and play two or three songs people are going to watch you and say, "I'd give *anything* to be able to play like that!"

## Speed

The problem with speed is that banjo students tend to make the mistake of thinking that playing fast is somehow different than playing slowly.

If you watch a truly accomplished player in action you will notice that whatever the tempo of the song is he works with the same easy pace. Whatever the speed of the song he or she never really appears to be playing fast.

To quote Mitamoto Musashi, " *Really skillful people never get out of time, are always deliberate, and never appear busy.* "

In other words, once you have developed your skills playing fast isn't really any different than playing slow. The note values stay the same, the rhythmic structure doesn't change and your technique doesn't change. The only thing that changes is the tempo.

Practice deliberately. Don't be in a rush to show off or get the song over with. My general rule of thumb is to never play a song any faster than I can sing it.

Build up your skills and after a while you'll be able to play fast and even ridiculously fast songs or breaks with just as much grace and ease as slow tunes.

Good first. Fast second.

# Tuning

Except where noted, the exercises in this book will be in open G tuning.

In open G tuning:

- The fifth string is tuned to G .
- The fourth string is tuned to D.
- The third string is tuned to G.
- The second string is tuned to B.
- The first string is tuned to D.

The short string is the fifth string. When you are holding your banjo the fifth string will be on top and the first string will be closest to the floor.

To tune the banjo without a tuner just follow these steps:

1. Assume that your first string is in tune.
2. Play your second string at the third fret. Tune it up or down so that it matches the sound of the first string played open.
3. Play your third string at the fourth fret. Tune it up or down so that it matches the sound of the second string played open.
4. Play your fourth string at the fifth fret. Tune it up or down so that it matches the sound of the third string played open.
5. The fifth string played open should sound the same as the first string played at the fifth fret.

# The Frailing Strum

Now we are going to discuss the heart and soul of old time banjo: the frailing strum.

You should already be familiar with this technique, but just in case I will kick off this chapter with a brief walkthrough of the basics. For a more thorough lesson on this and other frailing techniques pick up a copy of "The How and the Tao of Old Time Banjo".

## The Basic Technique

The frailing strum is a down-picking technique where you play the first four strings of the banjo with the back of your middle fingernail while playing the fifth string with your thumb. This is used to create a quarter note/two eighth note rhythm pattern.



*Dear Old Dad demonstrates proper picking posture*

You can teach yourself the proper picking hand posture for this by following a series of simple steps.

Hold your banjo in your lap with the pot flat against your stomach. Use a strap to support your banjo neck. Bring your banjo neck up so that the fifth peg is up by your ear. If you were facing a clock you'd want the neck up by 10 or 11.

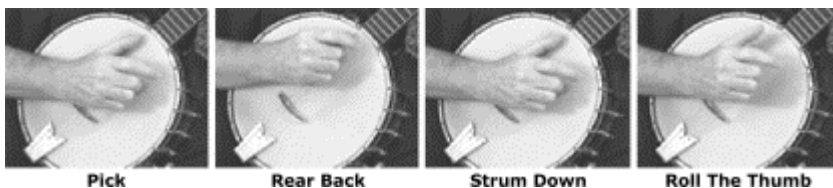
Hold out your picking hand and make a fist. Now stick out your index finger and thumb. The middle finger should be slightly extended and your ring and little fingers should lightly touch your palm.

Put your thumb on the banjo head so that you are just a little bit shy of touching the rim with the tip of your thumb. The pad of your thumb should be against the fifth string. Rest your middle fingernail on the first string.

With your thumb remaining on the fifth string roll your arm so that you raise your middle finger off the first string. Then drop that middle fingernail down to strike the first string. The movement here is from your arm. Your wrist should not be moving.

After you strike the first string roll your arm back so that your middle finger is directly above the third or fourth string. Now strum down across the strings. Once again, the motion is coming from your arm. Keep your thumb in place.

After you extend your hand for the strum you will notice that your thumb is putting pressure on the fifth string. Roll your thumb off of the fifth string, bring it up to your hand and then drop it back to its place on the fifth string in a continuous motion.



The most important factor in this technique is that your forearm is controlling most of the motion. You should not move your picking finger. There is hardly any wrist motion.

When you strike the first string your fingernail should be coming down on the string like a piano hammer. You are not picking across the string, you are striking down on it.

When you play the strum do not open up your hand or flick your fingers. The only thing you have to do is roll your forearm so that you drive your fingernail across the strings. Because we are using the thumb as a sort of pivot point the strum will not be directly across the strings but rather at a slight downward angle.

It sometimes helps to maintain the rhythm of the strum if you give each part a label. Let's call the pick "bump", the strum "dit" and the thumb rolling off the fifth string "ty".

Now tap out the rhythm of the strum with your foot:

- On the "bump" tap your foot.
- Bring your foot back up.
- As you tap your foot again do your strum for the "dit".
- As your foot is coming back up roll your thumb off of the fifth string for the "ty".

## Rhythm

In music everything from the notes you play to the rests where you don't play anything has a time value attached to it. That time value is defined as rhythm. Without rhythm the notes would have no context and everything would just come out like noise.

We break music up into measures with a specific number of beats. A beat is the term we use to describe the pulse of the music. The number of beats in a measure is dictated by the time signature.

The time signature tells us how many beats are played in a measure or group of measures. A time signature like 4/4 indicates that we will play four beats to a measure (4/) and that each beat will have the value of a quarter note (/4).

If the time signature was 3/4 it would indicate three beats to a measure (3/) and that each beat will have the value of a quarter note (/4).

6/8 indicates that each measure will have six beats (6/) and that each beat will have the value of an eighth note (/8).

♣ A whole note is just that, a note that is counted for the whole value of the measure.

♫ A half note has one half the time value of a whole note.

♫ A quarter note has one half the time value of a half note.

♫ An eighth note has one half the time value of a quarter note.

When you were tapping your foot and strumming the "bump dit-ty" rhythm you were playing one half of a measure in 4/4 time. To complete a measure in 4/4 time we would have to play two consecutive "bump dit-ty" strums.



Another way to count the "bump dit-ty" is "one two and". Playing a full measure in this fashion would result in the count "one two and three four and". Because the eighth note is only half of a beat we count on the downbeat (when you tap your foot) and say "and" on the upbeat (when your foot comes up).

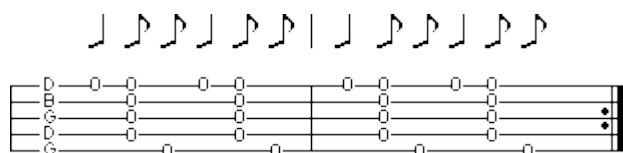
The next step is to apply this rhythmic concept to the frailing strum. Because the "bump" is a *quarter* note and the "dit" and the "ty" are *eighth* notes the "dit and "ty" must be held for exactly half of the time value of the "bump". This is easier to grasp if you remember to always tap your foot.

## Tablature

In order to illustrate the examples in this chapter I will have to introduce you to something called tablature. Tablature, or 'tab' for short, is just a way of writing the mechanics of a song or lick down.

You have five lines. Each line represents a string on your banjo. The fifth string is at the bottom and the first string is on top. When any string has a zero you play that string open. The numbers on a string tell you what fret to play.

Here is the frailing strum we have been working on in tablature:



## Practice Patterns

It is going to take you a good bit of time to "get" the technique of the "bump dit-ty" strum. Our old friend and picking buddy Paul Schoenwetter used to say that it takes about five hundred hours to become a solid frailer. Whether those hours take months or years is up to you.

Working on some practice patterns will go a long way towards helping you master this technique. On the next page I have tabbed out a handful of simple variations of the frailing strum for you to add to your practice routine.

Don't blow this off as "too basic". After more than twenty years of picking I still go back and run through these at least once a week to keep my right hand discipline in shape.



## Example One:



In this pattern we are playing a frailing strum on each string in succession. Hitting the first string is easy, but hitting the second, third and fourth strings with consistency will require some practice.

One thing that might make it easier is to remember that your wrist isn't moving to hit the inside strings. To find those strings just roll your forearm until the string you want to play is right under your middle fingernail. Remember to keep your thumb on the fifth string. You will notice that the webbing between your thumb and index finger opens and closes as your hand moves over the strings.

Once you get this one down cold try reversing the pattern so that you start on the fourth and end at the first.

## Example Two:



This is basically the same idea as the first pattern, but this time we are focusing on alternating from the first to the fourth string.

Spend some time with this one because you will be using this pattern quite a bit later on.

## Example Three:



Here we are working on alternating between the inside and outside strings.

## Example Four:



This is, without a doubt, the single most important practice run in this chapter. Maybe even in the entire book.

This pattern of alternating from the third to the fourth string is going to wind up being your "fall-back" position for backup techniques later on so spend some quality time working on it now.

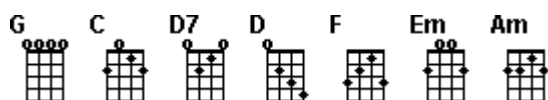
Practice these right hand patterns until you can do them almost by reflex before you start experimenting with chords.

## Chords

The first step to forming cords is to make sure that you are holding your banjo in the manner described at the beginning of this chapter. This isn't just a matter of formality. Keeping the neck with the fifth string peg "in your ear" makes the job easier for both of your hands because the fretboard is easily accessible and the strings are at an angle that makes the frailing strum easier to control.

We will use chord diagrams to illustrate the chord forms. The diagrams show the first four strings of your banjo neck and the first four frets. The strings are numbered 4-3-2-1, left to right, with 1 being your first string. The "0" symbols on top of the diagram tell you to play that string open. The black dots tell you where to put your fingers.

Some standard chord forms for the keys of G and C are diagrammed below.



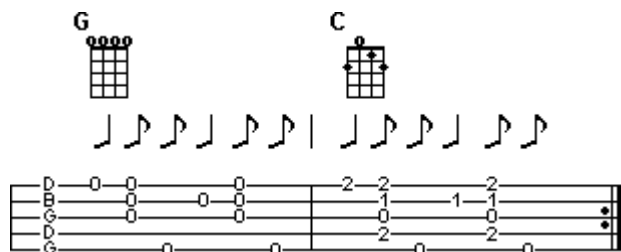
Spend some time just changing chords at random while playing the frailing strum. Listen closely to make sure each string is sounding clearly. If a string is muted or buzzing adjust your hand position until all four strings are ringing clearly. The critical thing to practice here is keeping the rhythm steady while changing chords. You may have to start out practicing the two motions individually. You could practice just changing from G to D or C to F over and over again without playing the frailing strum and slowly add in the right hand rhythm.

Once you can make a few chords clearly start experimenting with chord changes. An easy way to get started with this is to come up with some picking patterns like we used in the last section and experiment with changing chords.

This isn't a matter of playing a melody. What we are doing here is training the left and right hands to act independently. The first few times you go to make a chord change you are going to have to stop and think about where your fingers go. The goal here is getting to the point where you think, "make a C chord" and your fingers automatically drop on the proper strings. It's not impossible. It just takes practice.

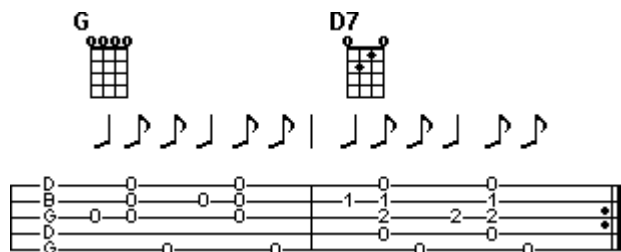
Let's look at a couple of chord change exercises.

## Example One:



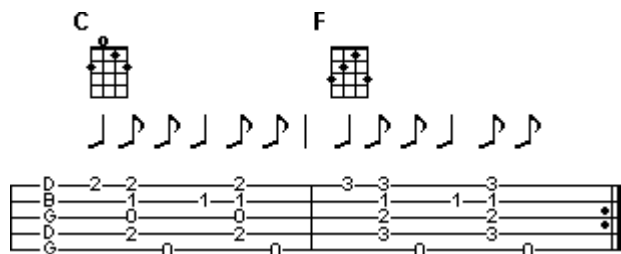
In this example we are playing a measure of G and a measure of C. Play this over and over again until the chord change can be performed without hesitating.

## Example Two:



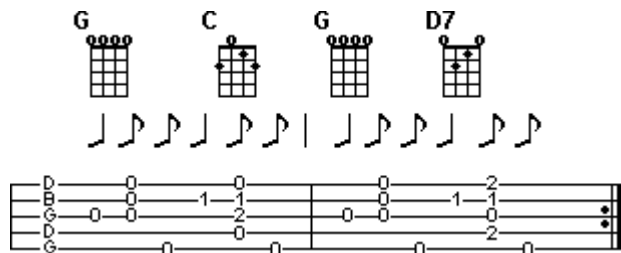
This is basically the same as the first example except that we are changing from G to D7.

## Example Three:



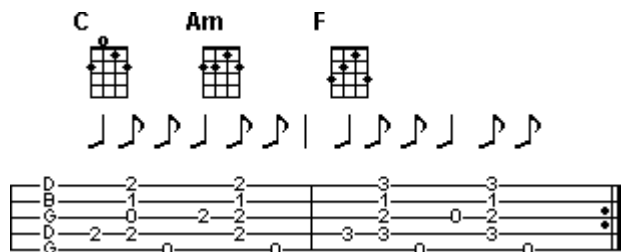
Changing from a C to an F chord can be tricky because making a full F chord requires using your little finger. This one will require dedicated practice to make the change smoothly.

## Example Four:



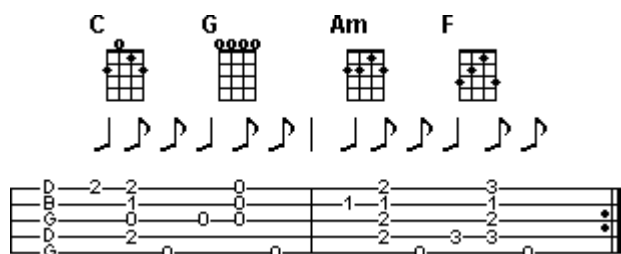
In this example we are playing half-measures. Measure one goes from G to C. Measure two switches from G to D7.

## Example Five:



Be sure to add some minor chords into your exercises.

## Example Six:



In this last example we are changing the chord on each "bump". Experiment with different chord combinations and come up with some of your own exercises. Once you can change chords while keeping a steady rhythm we can take a look at playing a couple of songs.

## Playing and Singing

Let's look at what we've done up to this point. We have looked at the basics of the frailing strum, rhythm in 4/4 time, forming chords and changing chords. Up to now we have practiced each of these things individually and blended one or two items together for some exercises. Now we are going to put it all together and add your voice into the mix.

Let's break a song into its basic framework. For our first example we'll look at the old fiddle tune "Cripple Creek".

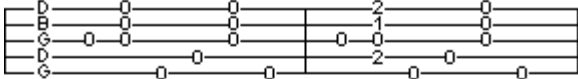
"Cripple Creek" is a song in 4/4 time. For this example we are going to play it in G.

We are not going to play the melody right now. What we are focusing on here is keeping a steady frailing strum (rhythm) along with the chord progression in order to create a back up for your voice.

## Cripple Creek 4/4 Time Key of G

**G** **C** **G**

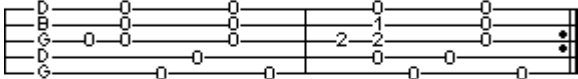
↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ | ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓



Girls on Cripple Creek 'bout half grown

**G** **D7** **G**

↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ | ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓

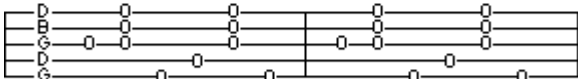


jump on a boy like a dog on a bone

### Chorus:

**G**

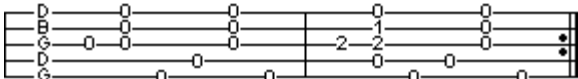
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Goin' up Cripple Creek goin' in a whirl

**G** **D7** **G**

↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ | ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓



Goin' up Cripple Creek to see my girl

All we are doing here is playing a simple frailing strum along with a chord progression while singing the lyrics.

That's easy to *say* , but in practice this can be a real challenge because your frailing strum, rhythm, chord changes and singing have to be right on the money. There is no time to think about what you are doing or to remember anything.

That's why the basic skills we looked at earlier are so important. If you put the effort into getting the frailing strum down and keeping a steady rhythm through the chord changes you can look at this tab for "Cripple Creek" and start playing and singing without a lot of fuss.

And right about now the odds are pretty good that you are saying to yourself, "But I *can't* sing!"

Yeah, you can sing. Anybody with a voice can sing. The trick is to relax and actually allow yourself to sing. Most of the problems that people have with singing revolve around the fact that they get so uptight about what people might think that they tense up. Once that happens they can't even *play* so singing goes out the window.

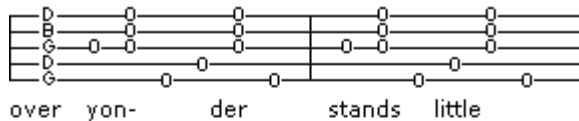
Just sing. You won't sound like a professional vocalist at first, but that's because you haven't had a lot of time to work with your voice just yet. It's like anything else, the more you do it the better you get at it.

The plus side to singing is that you can't really think and sing at the same time. Singing will force you to start listening and interacting with the flow of the music instead of trying to remember what note to hit. This is the first step to improvising.

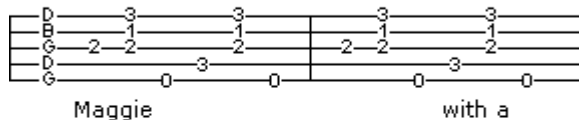
Let's look at another tune. "Little Maggie" is a bluegrass and old time favorite that's a lot of fun to play and sing.

## Little Maggie 4/4 Time Key of G

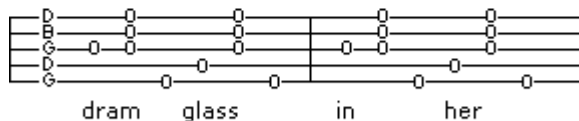
G



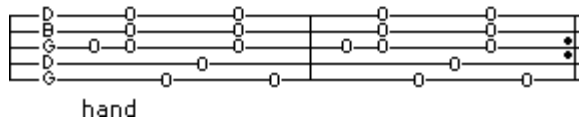
F



G



G



The first time I seen little Maggie She was sitting by the banks of the sea. Had a forty-five strapped 'round her shoulder and a banjo on her knee. Now she's marching to the station with a suitcase in her hand. She's going for to leave me She is bound for some distant land.

Now compare the tab for Little Maggie To Cripple Creek. You will see that we are just playing the same picking pattern to a new chord progression.

Now think about this for a second. We have two completely different songs but when we break them down into a simple back up pattern we find that they share a basic structure. If you pick up a book of folk, bluegrass or old time songs you will find that this approach will work for a pretty wide range of tunes in 4/4 time. All you have to do is play the chord progression along with an appropriate picking pattern and you're good to go. In fact, if all you ever learn is how to change a few chords and play a simple rhythm you can sing thousands of songs.

Understanding this, "seeing" this, is essential if you want to jam, learn songs or improvise. Get a songbook and start experimenting.

I know, I know. Right now you're thinking, "What about the melody?" Well, melody is important, but it's actually the last thing you want to worry about right now.

A lot of people make the mistake of trying to learn songs by memorizing the melody. As we discussed earlier in regards to changing chords you don't have time to stop and remember anything when you are playing a song. Now, if there isn't time to think about how to make a chord then how could there be enough time to remember every note in the entire song?

In the next chapter we are going to explore the building blocks of music and look at ways we can blend them with our basic frailing skills. Until then, spend some time working on the basics. Then kick back and play rhythm while you sing a few tunes.

# Scales, Chords & Chord Progressions

The thing I love about music is its simplicity.

A composer writing a symphony is going to use the same basic set of concepts as a guy plunking out a banjo tune on his front porch. The application might be different, but the rules of the language remain the same.

The goal of this chapter is to provide you with some basic tools for figuring out chord progressions, but since everything in music theory is connected we will have to begin by looking at scales and some other concepts.

The good news is that this stuff is not just easy. It's also universal. You will be able to apply the information in this chapter to almost any fretted instrument.

Like the old saying goes, "if you learn one thing, you learn ten thousand things."

## The Chromatic Scale

In Western music there are twelve musical notes named after the letters A through G with a note (or half step) between each pair of letters except between B and C and E and F.

Your half step is either a sharp (#) or a flat (b.) The half step between A and B can be called either A# or Bb.

A# means that the A note is raised one half step higher. Bb is the B note lowered one half step. A# and Bb are the same note and the other half steps follow the same pattern.

A   A#/Bb   B   C   C#/Db   D   D#/Eb   E   F   F#/Gb   G   G#/Ab

Once you understand the idea of half steps you can just write out your chromatic scale like this to save space and make it a tad clearer. The " | " symbol will be used to represent a half step.

A | B C | D | E F | G |

We are starting the chromatic scale in the examples above on A, but you can start a chromatic scale with any note.

D | E F | G | A | B C |

The other thing to be aware of is that these notes repeat each other in a sort of loop. Twelve steps in either direction will take you back to the note you started on.

D | E F | G | A | B C | D | E F | G | A | B C | D

The frets on your banjo are laid out in half steps that follow the chromatic scale.

Your first string is tuned to D. If you play the first string open and then play each fret all the way down to



the twelfth you wind up with a complete chromatic scale. This applies to any string on any fretted instrument.

Think about that for a second. *This applies to any string on any fretted instrument.* Remember what I said about the simplicity of music? Go pick up a mandolin or any other fretted instrument and you will find that the fretboard always follows the chromatic scale. Once you understand that and become familiar with how we can manipulate the chromatic scale you can just pick up just about anything with strings and figure out how to play it.

## Scales

A scale is nothing more than a sequence of notes selected from the chromatic scale. The sequence of notes chosen is dictated by the mode we are playing in. A mode is nothing more than a series of whole and half steps. Most of the music you are going to run into will be played in either a major or minor mode.

Major and minor modes also dictate the key signature of a song. When I say that a song is in the key of E what I am telling you is that we are going to play in the major mode with a root of E.

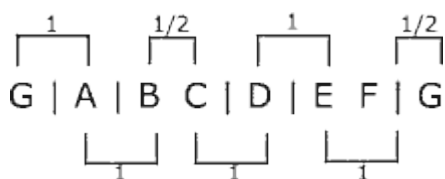
### Major mode

To create scales in major mode simply follow this pattern: Root, whole step, whole step, half step, whole step, whole step, whole step, half step.

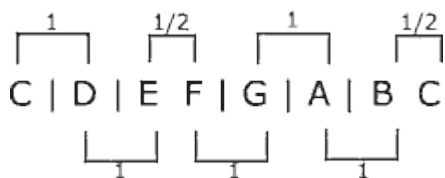
Choose a root note. For a G major scale you would choose G as the root. A whole step from G is A. A whole step from A is B. A half step from B is C and so on.

After following the whole and half steps you end up with a G major scale: G A B C D E F# G

This graphic illustrates how the whole and half steps create the G major scale.



If we were to start with C as the root we would end up with a C major scale with the notes C D E F G A B C.



The cool thing about knowing this pattern of whole and half steps is that you don't have to memorize individual scales. The fretboard is laid out in half steps so moving up or down two frets would be a whole step. That means you can choose a string at any fret and create a major scale just by moving up or down

the fretboard following the pattern of whole and half steps in the major mode.

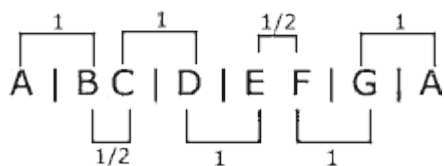
Once you can do that the next step is to start moving scales across the fretboard. This is just a matter of moving up or down the scale until the next note becomes available on an adjacent string.

If you take into consideration that all fretted instruments follow the chromatic scale it suddenly becomes possible to find scales on any stringed instrument.

## Minor Mode

Minor mode works under the same set of concepts as major mode with a separate set of whole and half steps. The steps for a minor scale are: Root, whole step, half step, whole step, whole step, half step, whole step, whole step.

If we choose a root note of A and follow the whole and half steps of the major mode we wind up with an A minor scale made up of the notes A C D E F G A.



Just like the major scale, this pattern will work anywhere on the fretboard.

Once we have some major and minor scales written out we can take a look at chord progressions.

## Chord Progressions

### Major Progressions

A chord is a sequence of notes played together. Whether it's three or more strings on your banjo or a string quartet playing four different notes simultaneously it's still a chord.

Every note in a scale has a chord associated with it. That's why every song, even the old and freaky fiddle tunes that folklorists swear are "inherently cordless" (insert a big roll of the eyes here) will have some kind of a chord progression.

In formal music theory the chords associated with each scale note are based on intervals and/or degrees of the scale. I'm not going to go into intervals here simply because it's not going to help you play the banjo right now. If you want to get deeper into the theoretical side of music you can pick that up on your own.

What we are going to do is look at the chords and chord progressions that are built from major scales.

Write out any major scale and assign each note a Roman numeral starting with the root as I. The second, third, sixth and seventh notes will be given lower case numerals and the remaining notes will be uppercase.

I'll write out a G major scale for this example.

G	A	B	C	D	E	F#	G
I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii <sup>0</sup>	I

The little " <sup>0</sup> " next to the seven indicates that the seventh chord of the scale is diminished. I'll get to just what that means in a moment.

We are using upper and lower case Roman numerals to distinguish between major and minor chords in the scale.

The lower case numerals indicate minor chord forms. In the key of G these chords are Am, Bm, and Em. The seventh chord isn't major or minor. It's a diminished chord.

The upper case numerals indicate major chords. In the key of G our three major chords are G, C and D. This is actually the "one-four-five" progression referred to when people use the Nashville number system. For the most part folk songs will revolve around the three major chords of the scale.

The I chord is the root chord for the scale. This is usually, but not always, the chord a song begins and ends on.

The ii, iii and vi chords are marked as minor here but they can and sometimes are played as major chords. A iii chord played as a major is sometimes called an "off chord" at jam sessions.

The vii<sup>0</sup> is the weird one. Because of it's place in the major scale it is theoretically supposed to be a diminished chord, but in folk music you'll often run into the vii<sup>0</sup> being played as a major chord. Go back and look at the chord progression for "Little Maggie" and you will see that we are playing an F major chord. Not F# or F#dim, but F major.

As we just discussed with the ii, iii and vii<sup>0</sup> chords, this is not cast in stone. You can theoretically use every chord in the chromatic scale in a song, but nine times out of ten the chords are going to stick to the framework we've just outlined in the major scale.

The reason this basic structure is helpful is that you can use it as a mental reference when you have to work out a song on the fly. If you know the song is in G then the odds are pretty good that the G, C and D chords will be the used in some fashion. If the song suddenly takes a weird turn then it might be the iii chord being played as a major. In the key of G that would be a B chord.

## Common Chord Progressions In Major Scales

Key	I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii <sup>0</sup>	I
C:	C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	B dim	C
D:	D	Em	F#m	G	A	Bm	C#dim	D
E:	E	F#m	G#m	A	B	C#m	D#dim	E
F:	F	Gm	Am	Bb	C	Dm	E dim	F
G:	G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F#dim	G
A:	A	Bm	C#m	D	E	F#m	G#dim	A

The key isn't to memorize every scale. As I've said before memorizing won't help you much. The key is to develop an intuitive feeling for the way chord progression work regardless of the key. A good way to start working on that is to transpose a song you already know into different keys.

## Transposing

People make transposing seem a lot tougher than it really is. All we have to do is move to a new scale.

Take "Cripple Creek" for example. Earlier in the book we played it in G using the chords G, C and D.

It just so happens that these are the I, IV and V chords in the major scale. To play the song in D all we have to do is pull the I, IV and V chords from another scale and swap things around.

We will go into transposing melodies a little later on in this book.

## Minor Progressions

Minor chord progressions are charted out much like major progressions, but the order of major and minor chords change.

i	ii <sup>0</sup>	III	iv	v	VI	VII	i
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	A

In a minor scale the first, fourth and eighth notes are marked with lower case numerals to indicate minor chords. The third, sixth and seventh notes are marked with upper case numbers to indicate major chords. The fifth note will be marked as a minor chord with a lower case number in a natural minor scale. In a harmonic minor scale the fifth note can, in some cases, wind up being played as a major chord. The second note in a minor scale, like the seventh note in a major scale, is *usually* a diminished chord.

Just as the major scale has the I-IV-V progression minor scales use an i-iv-v7 or i-iv-V7 progression. In A minor those chords would be Am, Dm, and Em or Am, Dm, and E7.

## Common Chord Progressions in Minor Scales

Key	i	ii <sup>0</sup>	III	iv	V	VI	VII	i
<b>Am:</b>	Am	Bdim	C	D /Dm	Em	F	G	Am
<b>Bm:</b>	Bm	C#dim	D	E /Em	F#m	G	A	Bm
<b>Cm:</b>	Cm	Ddim	Eb	F /Fm	Gm	Ab	Bb	Cm
<b>Dm:</b>	Dm	Edim	F	G /Gm	Am	Bb	C	Dm
<b>Em:</b>	Em	F#dim	G	A /Am	Bm	C	D	Em
<b>Fm:</b>	Fm	Gdim	Ab	Bb/Bbm	Cm	Db	E	Fm
<b>Gm</b>	Gm	Adim	Bb	C /Cm	Dm	Eb	F	Gm

## Chord Construction

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter chords are built on the intervals and degrees of the scale. What that means without writing out enough theory to make both of our heads explode is that a major chord is made of the first, third and fifth notes in the scale.

To make a G chord those notes would be G, B and D. Find those three notes anywhere on the fretboard and play them together and it's a G chord.

Other chord forms or flavors are made up of different combinations of notes. I'll chart a few of them out for you to experiment with.

**Minor chord:** 1, 3b, 5 notes in the scale.

**Major 7 chord:** 1, 3, 5, 7 notes in the scale.

**Minor 7 chord:** 1, 3b, 5, 7b notes in the scale.

**Dominant 7 chord:** 1, 3, 5, 7b notes in the scale.

**Diminished chord:** 1, 3b, 5b, 6 notes in the scale.

**Augmented chord:** 1, 3, 5# notes in the scale.

**6<sup>th</sup> chord:** 1, 3, 5, 6 notes in the scale.

**Suspended chord:** 1, 4, 5 notes in the scale.

You don't have to memorize the notes of every chord form, but understanding that chords are built from scales will help you find melody lines and scale patterns on the fretboard in jamming situations.

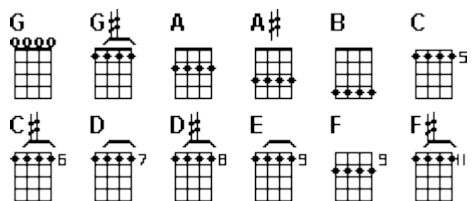
Before you head to the next chapter spend some time tinkering with chord progressions. Listen to how even a progression as simple as the I-IV-V can be bent and reshaped into different sounds.

The next step is to use those sounds to create melodies and exciting rhythms.

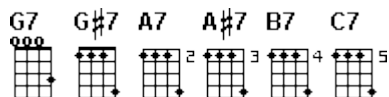
## Moveable Chord Forms

Because the fretboard is laid out in half steps along the chromatic scale you can move chord forms up and down the neck. What this means is that you can learn almost every available chord on your banjo just by moving around a handful of chord forms.

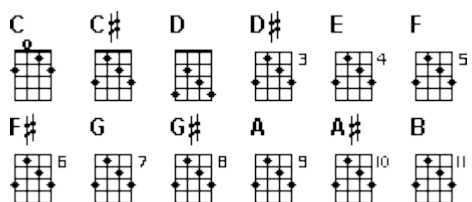
### The G Position:



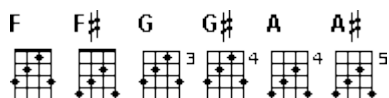
The G7 chord follows the same pattern.



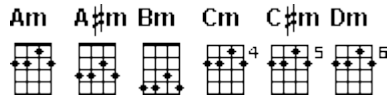
### The C Position:



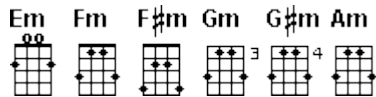
### The F Position:



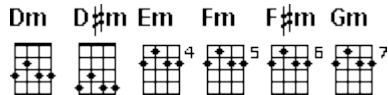
### The Am Position:



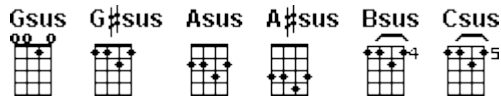
### The Em Position:



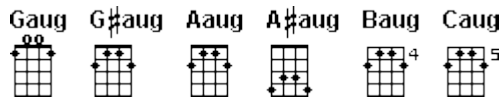
### The Dm Position:



### Suspended Position:



### Augmented Position:



## "Root-Five"

When you hear a bass or guitar alternating between high and low bass notes they are playing two notes of the chord in what is often called a "root-five" pattern.

I know what you're thinking, why is it called root-five if there are only three notes in a major chord?

Major chords are made from the first, third and fifth notes in the scale. For example, a G major chord is made up of the notes G-B-D. To play an alternating bass over a G chord we would play G (the root note) and D (the fifth note) of the G scale. "Root-five."

The practice pattern I pointed out earlier as being one of the most useful is a root-five pattern because we were alternating between the G (root) string and the D ("five") string.

In a jam session listening to the bass pattern of the guitar or bass can assist you in spotting chord changes. Once you start to recognize the pattern you will begin to feel the alternating bass pushing the song into the next chord.

Backing up your voice by playing a frailing strum with alternating bass can really "fill out" the sound of a song.

One thing to be aware of when it comes to using this idea is that the banjo has limits when it comes to bass strings. For example, when a chord progression goes to C (a C chord is made of the notes C-E-G) we have to compromise a bit because we don't have a low C string in open G tuning. We could retune the fourth string to C, but that opens up a separate set of problems. The easy solution is to compromise and

play the E note on the fourth string at the second fret.

Let's try playing the verse of "Cripple Creek" using the root-five pattern.

## Cripple Creek 4/4 Time Key of G

girls on Cripple Creek 'bout half grown

jump on a boy like a dog on a bone

Try working out high and low bass patterns for other chord progressions on your own.

## Chopping And Vamping

Another useful tool for working out a chord progression for playing backup is the chop.

In the basic frailing strum we are counting out each measure with the emphasis on the first and the third beats. The quarter notes (bump) in the "bump dit-ty" stand out a little more than the eighth notes (dit-ty) so the count comes out as " **one** two and **three** four and".

To play the chop we switch the emphasis over to the second and fourth beats. To do this we rest on the first beat, strum on the second beat, rest on the third beat and strum on the fourth beat.

This changes the count to something more like "one **chop** three **chop**".

one chop three chop one chop three chop

In order to emphasize this altered count we add in a left hand technique called vamping. To vamp all we have to do is slightly lighten up the pressure of our fingers on the strings just after the strum. The idea is to only lift up enough to stop the ringing of the chord. Your fingers stay on the strings to deaden them. This cuts the ringing of the strings short.

This is a great way to feel out chord progressions in a jam session and add a little salt and pepper into your backup playing. For maximum effect you should use closed chord positions such as the F-position G chord when "chopping".

Now try playing "Cripple Creek" using the chop.



# Putting It All Together

Let's use the material from the last two chapters to work out a few songs. For these examples we're going to look at some tunes from my two favorite singing banjo players, Uncle Dave Macon and Charlie Poole. You can download free copies of the original 78rpm recordings of these and many more great songs from [www.honkingduck.com](http://www.honkingduck.com) or [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org).

All of these tunes are in 4/4 time so the frailing strum will fit the lyrics. You just have to match everything up.

## Hesitation Blues

I  
If the river was whiskey and I was a duck  
I'd dive to the bottom and I'd never come up.

### Chorus:

IV I  
Oh tell me how long do I have to wait  
V I  
Oh can I get you now, or must I hesitate?

If the river was whiskey and the branch was wine  
you'd see me in bathing just any ole time

I was born in England, raised in France  
I bought a suit of clothes and they wouldn't send the pants

I was born in Alabama, raised in Tennessee  
If you don't like my peaches don't shake my tree

I looked down the road as far as I can see  
A man had my woman and the blues had me

Got the hesitation stockings got the hesitation shoes  
Oh my Lord I got the hesitation blues

In our first song, "Hesitation Blues," we are playing the I chord through the entire verse. As you already know the I chord is the root of the scale so if you want to play this in the key of G your I chord would be G. In the Key of C your I chord would be C.

You can play a frailing strum for the verse, but try it at least once with the chop. The only tricky part is going to be figuring out how many measures to hold each chord, but if you work with the chord progression and the phrasing of the words you'll get a feel for it.

## Go Long Mule

IV                    I                    IV            I  
I've got a mule he's such a fool  
IV                    V  
he never pays no heed,  
IV                    I                    IV            I  
I built a fire right under him,  
V                    I  
and then I made some speed.

### Chorus:

IV                    I  
Oh go long mule, don't you roll those eyes,  
IV                    I                    IV            I  
You can change a fool but a doggone mule  
V                    I  
is a mule until he dies.

Oh, Jerry Ache and Dotty Payne  
got married on the train,  
and now the State of Georgia is  
just full of aches and pains.

A man way down in Georgia  
pulled his gun on me,  
but when he fired that second shot  
I passed through Tennessee.

I went down to the graveyard once  
to see some friends of mine,  
but when a black cat crossed my path  
I sure Lord changed my mind!

"Go Long Mule" kicks off with the IV chord. This is going to feel a little strange at first, but once you get into the rhythm of the song it starts to make sense.

The chord changes in the first verse are played in half measures. It might help to phrase the first line as "I've got a *mule he's* such a *fool*".

## If I Lose

I  
I can't walk, neither can I talk  
IV  
Came all the way from  
the state of old New York  
V I  
One morning before day

### Chorus:

I  
If I lose, let me lose  
V I  
I don't care how much I lose  
I  
If I lose a hundred dollars  
IV  
while I'm tryin' to win a dime  
V I  
for my baby, she needs money all the time

Flossie, oh Flossie, now what is the matter  
Walked all the way from old Cincinatti  
One morning before day

The blood was a-runnin', and I was runnin' too  
Give my feet some exercise,  
I had nothing else to do  
One morning before day

See them pretty girls standing by the tanks  
Waiting on the freight train  
they call old Nancy hanks  
One morning before day

In "If I lose" the chord progression is pretty standard so you shouldn't have too much trouble with it. The tricky part of this song is the phrasing of the lyrics. Once you figure out the measures of the tune you have to stick to it. Don't add a measure to a couple of verses so you can fit the words in.

## Way Downtown

IV I  
Late last night Little Willie came home,  
V I  
I heard him knocking on the door,  
IV I  
Slipping and a-sliding with his new shoes on,  
V I  
Hey Willie don't you knock no more.

### Chorus:

IV I V I  
Oh me, and it's oh my, no one to go my bail  
IV I  
Way down town just fooling around,  
V I  
They took me to the jail.

The last time I heard from my momma,  
she saw me in that old jail cell  
"Quit your rowdy ways my son,  
and save your soul from Hell."

Now, its one old shirt is all that I got  
And a dollar is all that I crave  
I brought nothing with me into this old world  
Ain't gonna take nothing to my grave

I wish I was over at my sweet Sally's house  
Sittin' in that big armed chair  
One arm around this old guitar

And the other one around my dear

Here we have another song that kicks off on the IV chord, but this time the effect is completely different. Instead of a half measure we are holding the IV for a full measure and running back to it in the chorus.

Start looking around in songbooks for more tunes to work on. It's a great way to become familiar with the I-IV-V progression and the ways chords sound together.

# Jamming

I have a simple test for any new musical skill: If I can't pull it off at a jam session then I don't really know it.

It's one thing to be able to play a song at home for your own entertainment, but it's another thing entirely to jump into the flow of a jam. At home it's not a big deal if you drop a beat out of a measure or screw up the timing of a song, but if you do that in a *group* setting you will throw everybody out of rhythm and the song will just die.

The thing you have to keep in mind is that music is a discipline. There are rules and structures built into the basic language of music that must be followed if you want to play with other musicians. You cannot ignore the fact that 4/4 time must have four beats to a measure or that you can't slow down the tempo of a song because of tough chord changes and then speed up when the easy ones come along.

These rules are not here to bog down your creativity or force you to sound like everybody else. They are here to enable you to communicate with other players. If there wasn't a mutually agreed upon set of concepts to work with everybody could come up with their own definitions and the results of that would be chaotic.

Getting into a jam session and learning to play rhythm with a group is essential if you want to move into more melodic old time banjo techniques. Memorizing the melody or the tab isn't going to cut it. You have to build up an instinctive feeling for chord progressions and rhythm in order for the melodic material to work. The only way to do that is to start jamming.

Don't say that nobody in your neck of the woods plays an instrument because every community on earth has a couple of seasoned folk musicians rattling around. All you have to do is find them. Check out your local folk song society. Go to festivals. Support your local coffeehouse or house concert series. An ad in the local paper or a flyer in the local music store inviting people to jam can stir up some local pickers. You might also want to ask around at used record shops and any other place in town where old recordings, songbooks and used instruments might be available.

Once you do hook up with some like-minded folks just focus on the rhythm and the chord progression for a while. Start by playing a simple frailing rhythm like the third string-fourth string pattern from earlier in this book or play the chop and follow the chord progression as best you can.

Treat every new tune the same way we worked out songs with the I-IV-V progression. Identify the time signature, work out the chord progression and come up with a rhythm pattern to hold it all together.

The first few times you get together this is going to be pretty challenging, but over time things will start to click.

You will go from fighting through a song while trying to keep up with the chord progression to anticipating chord changes almost instinctively. This process takes a little bit of time, but if you are patient and look at each jam as a chance to hang out with friends in the spirit of fellowship this wonderful thing called music gets much easier.

Spend some time jamming and get a feel for rhythm and chord changes before you move on to the next chapter.

# Timing And Phrasing

In order to play melody with the frailing strum we have to be able to shift the rhythm into different patterns, sometimes from measure to measure, while keeping a steady beat.

## Quarter Note Patterns

In the basic 4/4 time frailing strum we play a pattern of one quarter note and two eighth notes twice in each measure.



The count for each measure is "1 2 & 3 4 &" or "bump dit-ty, bump dit-ty"

In this next example we are going to play three quarter notes followed by a strum-thumb (dit-ty).

### Example One:



The count for this new pattern is "1 2 3 4 &, 1 2 3 4 &" or "bump bump bump dit-ty".

We can get away with this because playing three quarter notes and two eighth notes gives us the same time value as two frailing strums. That's the trick to rhythm. You can play any combination of notes and/or rests in a measure as long as their total added value matches the time signature.

That's the theory, now we have to look at the technique.

The big issue here is control. With the basic frailing strum we have a repeating pattern to work with so it's fairly easy to maintain a constant rhythm. When we start changing one or more measures in a song we are intentionally throwing ourselves out of this rhythmic pattern and that can make it easy to lose control of the rhythm.

This control issue is the reason I stressed driving the motion of the strum from the forearm with the thumb resting on the fifth string. If you are playing with a lot of wrist movement or flicking your fingers you wind up adding in a recovery period after each motion and that makes it extremely difficult to keep things together when you start breaking up the measures.

Let's look at another picking pattern.

## Example Two



Moving between the fourth and first strings should be nothing more than a matter of opening and closing the webbing between your thumb and index finger if you are using the proper technique. There is almost no recovery time because there is very little motion going on. You are just moving your forearm enough to put the fourth or first string directly under your middle fingernail.

With sloppy technique this run becomes more and more difficult as you pick up speed because you have to swing your wrist back and forth to reach the strings.

Keep in mind that we're only talking about quarter notes right now. When we get into eighth and sixteenth note runs there is even less time to work with.

Proper technique is a pain in the neck to practice in the beginning, but over the long stretch it literally makes everything easier.

Let's look at a few more exercises.

## Example Three



As simple as this exercise is on paper it may take you some time to be able to hit the right strings. The trick to this is not to look at your picking hand.

Looking at your hand in order to "find" the string you want to hit is pretty futile. By the time your eyes single out the string, send the signal and your brain fires off the command to your hand you'll have already slipped out of rhythm. There just isn't any time to "think" when you are playing.

For a pattern like this the way to practice is to focus on the rhythm. You want to at least *try* to hit the correct strings, but not at the expense of the rhythm. If you hit a bum note don't stop or start over again. Just keep the rhythm flowing.

If you stick to it you will eventually develop a feel for where your hand is in relation to the strings and you'll hit the right one every time without thinking about it.



## Example Four



In this example we are playing a "bump dit-ty" followed by two single notes. This creates count of "1 2& 3 4" in each measure.

Play this back-to-back with example one. In example one we were playing three quarter notes followed by two eighth notes. In this example it's a quarter note, two eighth notes and two quarter notes. It's the same notes, but by changing the sequence (rhythm) we end up with something that sounds completely different.

## Example Five



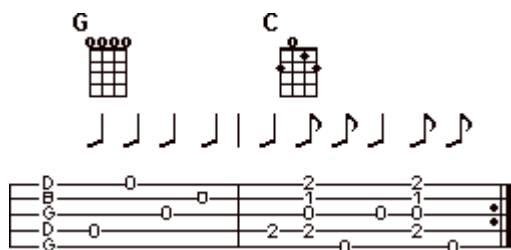
In this example we have combined elements from two of the earlier examples. The count for this exercise is "1 2& 3 4, 1 2 3 4&"

## Example Six



Nothing changes when you add a chord into the mix. In this example we are working out of an F chord.

## Example Seven



In this example we are working out of a chord progression. Once you can play this smoothly make up some of your own exercises to blend quarter note runs with chord progressions.

# Eighth Note Patterns

Once you can play some quarter note runs smoothly the next step is to start working on eighth note patterns.

An eighth note is literally half of a quarter note. What this means in terms of the banjo is that we have to cut the "bump" in the **bump** < dit-ty in half ( **1&** 2& **3&** 4& ).

## Hammer-On's & Pull-Off's

These two easy techniques are used to split a quarter note in half. Your picking hand only has to worry about hitting a string. The fretting hand does the rhythmic work.

At it's most basic a hammer-on involves nothing more than striking a string and, while it's still ringing, hammering your finger on a fret. This shortens the initial sound of the string and sets off a second tone creating the "1&" count of a pair of eighth notes.

### Example One



In this example we are striking the third string open and then hammering our finger onto the second fret. This is cutting the "bump" in half to produce two eighth notes. You will also notice that I shortened the "dit" to only strike the first and second string. This is optional, but it's worth practicing because sometimes you are going to have to play the strum "around" fretted notes that may clash with the open chord.

A pull-off works just the opposite from a hammer-on. You fret a string, strike it and, as it's still ringing, pull your finger off of the fret.

Just like a hammer-on, this shortens the initial sound of the string and sets off a second tone creating the "1&" count of a pair of eighth notes.

### Example Two



Here we have a pull-off exercise that's pretty much a carbon copy of example one. Compare the sound of this exercise to the earlier hammer-on version. It *should* sound the same because we're working with the same strings, the same rhythm and the same fret, but the fact is that these two techniques yield very different results.

Let's play some licks that feature hammer-on's and pull-off's so we can become familiar with how they sound.

### Example Three



In this lick we are moving up the neck to the fifth fret. The count is 1& 2& 3 4&, 1& 2& 3 4&.

### Example Four



Here we are playing hammer-on's and ending the second measure with a quarter note run. This is good practice to make sure that the hammer-on action isn't throwing your rhythm off.

The count is 1& 2 3& 4&, 1& 2 3 4.

### Example Five



In this example we are playing out of a G suspended chord. This is the kind of lick that is usually associated with what some people call "mountain modal" music.

The count is 1& 2& 3& 4&, 1 2 3 4&.

## Example Six

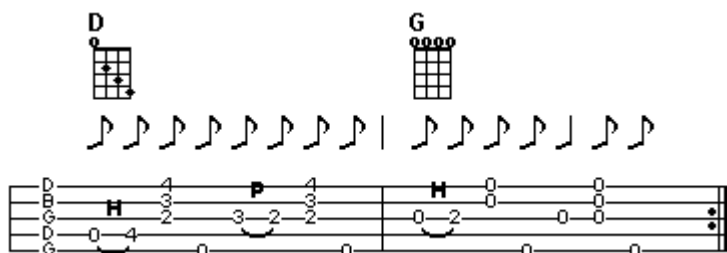


In this example we are playing a series of pull-off's.

The neat thing about a lick like this is that your picking hand is only playing a basic frailing pattern, but with the pull-off's it sounds much more complicated.

The count is 1& 2& 3& 4&, 1& 2& 3& 4&.

## Example Seven

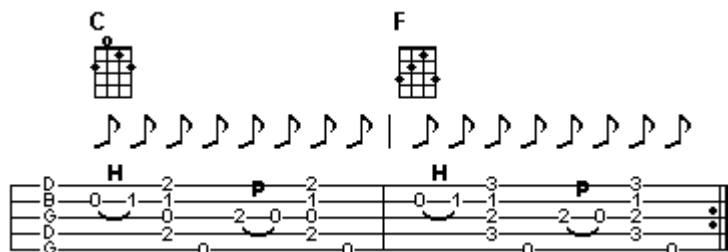


In this example we are mixing up hammer-on's and

pull-offs with chord changes. The hammer-on and the pull-off in the D chord are both performed with the ring finger.

The count is 1& 2& 3& 4&, 1& 2& 3& 4&.

## Example eight



In this example we are changing from a C chord to an F chord. This should be pretty easy because we are playing the same pattern through both measures. The only things that change are the chord forms.

The count is 1& 2& 3& 4&, 1& 2& 3& 4&.

## Example Nine



The timing for example nine shouldn't be that tricky. Your picking hand isn't doing anything in the first measure except playing four quarter notes. It's the fretting hand that's doing the work, and if you really look at it there isn't that much going on. This is one of those licks that can sound impressive or difficult, but at its core it's just the basic frailing strum.

The count is 1& 2& 3& 4&, 1 2& 3 4&.

## Slides

Another way to split notes in half is to play a slide.

A slide is where you play a string at any fret and, while it's still ringing, drag your finger up or down the fretboard to another fret.

The effect of a slide is similar to a hammer-on or pull-off in that you are breaking a note in half, but the thing that makes a slide unique is the way it blends the two notes together. A hammer-on or pull-off creates two distinct notes. A slide eases into the next note.

The thing I love about slides is that you can get so many different sounds just by changing the amount of pressure on the string. You can keep a steady pressure all the way through the motion for one sound, but if you alter the pressure along the way it can change the whole effect.

## Example One



In this example we are sliding on the second and fourth strings. The tab may look different from the basic frailing strum at first glance, but if you look closely you will see that your picking hand is only playing a basic frailing strum. Like the hammer-on and pull-off slides are completely independent of the picking hand. You are creating the *sound* of four eighth notes, but your right hand is treating it like a quarter note and two eighth notes.

The count is 1& 2& 3 4&, 1& 2& 3 4&.

## Example Two



In this example we are sliding on the first and second strings. The slide in the second measure is worth paying attention to because we are sliding the second string to where it matches the open first string. That strum after the slide with the first and second strings ringing the same D note can be used in a lot of situations where you want to add a little bit of flavor or emphasis to a song. Experiment with the effect and you'll be pleasantly surprised at how many ways you can use it.

The count is 1& 2& 3 4&, 1& 2& 3 4&.

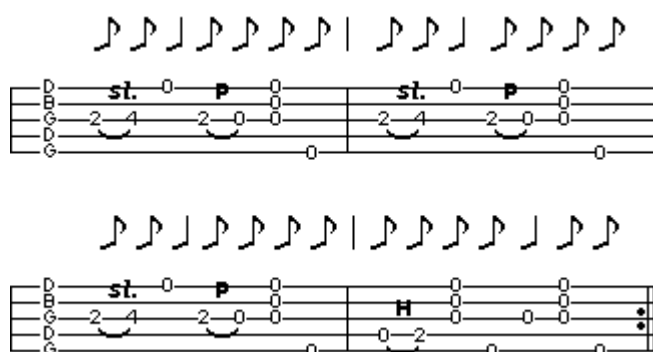
## Example Three



In this example we have a slide followed by a pull-off played over the basic frailing rhythm. This sort of rhythmic pattern comes in handy when you are backing up fiddle tunes.

The count is 1& 2& 3& 4&, 1& 2& 3& 4&.

## Example Four

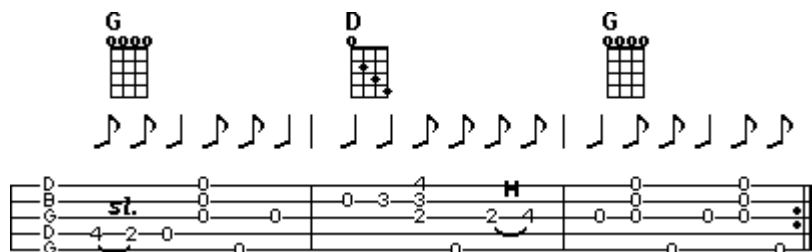


Like example three, this is another rhythmic pattern you can use for backup. The difference here is that we are breaking out of the frailing pattern in favor of playing a single quarter note between the slide on the third string and the pull-off.

The count in the first three measures is 1& 2 3& 4&.

The count in the fourth measure is 1& 2& 3 4&.

## Example Five



Slides are not a one-way deal. In this example we are sliding on the fourth string at the fourth fret to the second fret. The other thing to note in this example is that in addition to the slide we are also playing single notes and a hammer-on through a chord progression.

The count is 1& 2 3& 4, 1 2 3& 4&, 1 2& 3 4&.

## Double Thumb

Hammer-on's, pull-off's and slides are *fretting* hand techniques that split quarter notes into eighth notes. Double thumb is a *picking* hand technique used to split notes.

The technique itself is pretty easy but the timing can be difficult if you haven't spent enough time working with the basic frailing strum.

## Example One



In this first tab we have a simple quarter note lick similar to what we were working on at the beginning of this chapter. The count here is 1 2 3 4&, 1 2 3 4&.

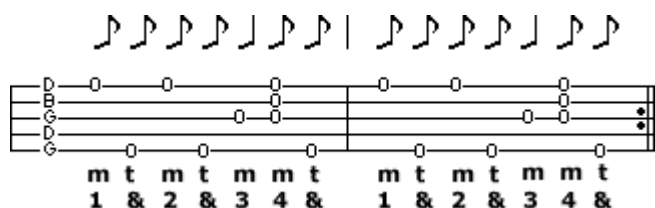
No problem, right?

What we are going to do now is pluck the fifth string with our thumb after the first two single notes in each measure. This is easy enough because our thumb, if we are using the proper basic frailing technique, is riding right on the fifth string.



The count is now 1& 2& 3 4&, 1& 2& 3 4&.

Let's take a closer look at what's going on.



Here is the same lick with the count and the fingering laid out beneath it. All we are doing is following the two single notes with the thumb on the fifth string. If we left out the thumb the tab would go right back to the initial example where we were playing quarter notes.

A good way to build up an understanding of when to use double thumbing might be to look at how a flatpicking guitarist plays a solo. Part of the speed in flatpicking comes from the ability to pick up and down on a string to play eighth notes. In frailing we are only working with a down stroke, but we can create the illusion of that up and down motion by doubling single notes with the fifth string.

## Example Two



In this example we are playing a double thumb on each string from the first to the fourth in the first measure and from the fourth to the first in the second.

The count is 1& 2& 3& 4&, 1& 2& 3& 4&.

## Example Three



In this example we are weaving the double thumb across all four strings. This a good practice pattern for your picking hand.

The count is 1& 2& 3& 4&, 1& 2& 3& 4&.



## Example Four



There is a lot going on in this example. In the first measure we are playing a double thumb on the first string fifth fret followed by two quarter notes. In the second measure we have a pull-off followed by a single note and a frailing strum.

The count is 1& 2& 3 4, 1& 2 3 4&.

## Example Five



There is only one double thumb in this example, but look at how we are using it right in the middle of a string of eighth notes.

The count is 1& 2& 3& 4&, 1& 2 3 4&.

## Example Six

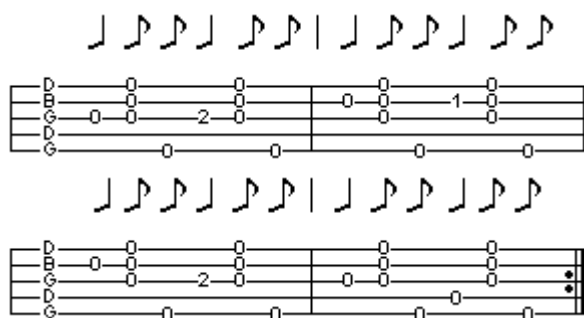


In this example we are mixing in the double thumb with pull-offs and a slide.

The count is 1& 2& 3& 4&, 1& 2& 3 4&.

## Example Seven

In this last example of the double thumb let's look at how to convert a basic frailing strum into a string of single notes.

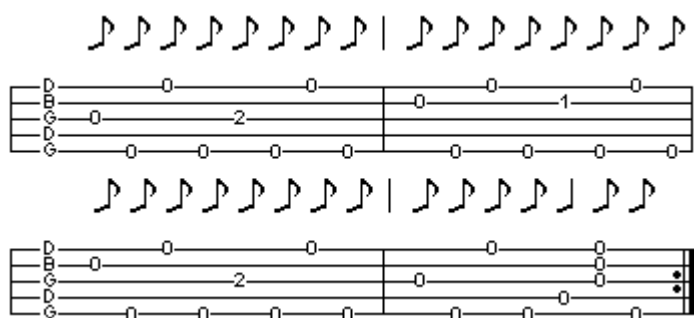


Is this tab we have a simple melody played with the basic frailing strum.

In order to convert this to single notes we can double thumb the "bump" but we have to fill in the "dit-ty" somehow.

That's the kicker. We can do pretty much whatever we want in the confines of a measure, but we have to make musical sense while we're doing it. If we turn the quarter notes into eighth notes we have to do something in place of the strum thumb.

The next tab illustrates one solution to this problem.



What we have done here is replaced the strum-thumb with a double thumb. That gives us the space we need between the notes to keep the melody intact and creates an interesting rhythm at the same time. I left the last quarter note and two eighth note pattern intact to give the exercise a sense of conclusion. If you want to play this in a repeating pattern for practice you can change that to double thumbs on your own.

## Phantom Effects

Up to this point every technique we have been exploring involves playing one note at a time. This makes sense because in old time banjo we are only working with our thumb and middle fingernail in a downward motion.

In order to create at least the illusion that there is more than one string being played we have to bring the left hand into the game with what I usually group under the general heading of phantom effects.

A phantom effect is when you play a string with your picking hand while playing another string with your fretting hand.

## Example One



In this example we are playing the "bump" of the basic frailing strum on the first string and at the same time hammering on the third string at the second fret.

The timing here is 1& 2& 3& 4&, 1& 2& 3& 4&.

This is tricky to tab out because as far as your right hand is concerned you are playing a quarter note and two eighth note frailing strum, but because of the hammer-on being added by your fretting hand it *sounds* like you are playing a string of eighth notes.

## Example Two



In this example the picking hand is playing a "root-five" pattern in G. The fretting hand is hammering-on and pulling-off the first string at the fifth fret. In order to get a smooth rhythm here just play the frailing strum while alternating between the third and fourth strings. Then add in the phantom effect on the first string.

The count is 1 2& 3 4&, 1 2& 3 4& but it *sounds* like 1& 2& 3& 4&, 1& 2& 3& 4&.

## Example Three



Here is a lick similar to Example Two, but this time we are pulling-off on the first string.

Listen to the playing of the great Buell Kazee on [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org) for examples of this lick in use.

The count is 1 2& 3 4&, 1 2& 3 4& but it *sounds* like 1& 2& 3& 4&, 1& 2& 3& 4&.

## Example Four



In this example we are playing the third and second strings while the fretting hand is playing the phantom effect on the fourth string.

The count is 1 2& 3 4&, 1 2& 3 4& but it *sounds* like 1& 2& 3& 4&, 1& 2& 3& 4&.

## Example Five



In this example we are playing the first string with the picking hand. The phantom effect is played on the third string at the second fret. We are changing it here by playing a phantom hammer-on and then at the same time we are playing the strum-thumb we sliding from the second string to the fourth fret. The slide and the strum are happening at the same time.

The count is 1& 2& 3 4&, 1& 2& 3 4&.

## Arranging Tunes

Let's put what we have learned so far to practical use and come up with our own arrangement for a song.

You'll hear the song "Old Joe Clark" played just about everywhere. It's usually thought of as a fiddle tune but it has a set of lyrics to sing and a really easy chord progression.

The first step to working out a tune is figuring out the rhythm and the chord progression. For this example we are going to play "Old Joe Clark" in the key of G in 4/4 time.

I will tab out the chord progression with a basic frailing strum for you, but the next song we work on you are going to have to do this all by yourself.

# Old Joe Clark verse

## 4/4 Time Key of G

**G**



Old Joe Clark's a fine old man I'll

**G**

**D7**



tell you reason why he

**G**



keeps corn liquor in his house

**G**

**F**

**G**



good old rock and rye

Old Joe Clark he had a mule,  
His name was Morgan Brown,  
And every tooth in that mule's head  
Was sixteen inches 'round.

Old Joe Clark had a yellow cat,  
She would neither sing nor pray,  
She stuck her head in the buttermilk jar  
And washed her sins away.

Old Joe Clark had a house  
Fifteen stories high,

And every story in that house  
Was filled with chicken pie.

I went down to old Joe's house,  
He invited me to supper,  
I stumped my toe on the table leg  
And stuck my nose in the butter.

Now I wouldn't marry a widder,  
Tell you the reason why,  
She'd have so many children,  
They'd make those biscuits fly

## Old Joe Clark *Chorus*

### 4/4 Time Key of G

**G**



Fare thee well

Old Joe Clark

**G**

**F**



fare the well I

say

**G**



Fare thee well

Old Joe Clark I'm

**G**

**F**

**G**



bound to go a-

-way

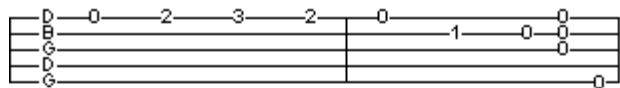
Nothing too hard here, right? We have a pretty straightforward chord progression and just playing a simple rhythm and singing works well enough that you could stop right now and take it out to a jam session.

But, since we want to add hammer-on's, pull-off's and double thumbs we have to keep moving along with this song and start looking at the melody.

# Old Joe Clark *Melody*

## 4/4 Time Key of G

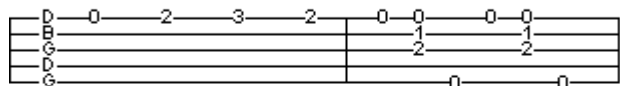
## G



Old Joe Clark's a fine old man I'll

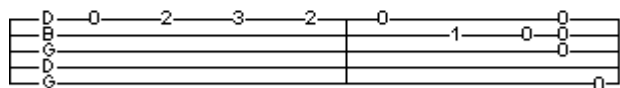
**G**

D7



tell you rea- son why he

**G**



keeps corn liq- uor in his house

**G**

**F**

G

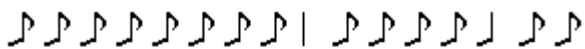


good old rock and rye

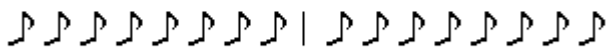
Here we have the basic melody for "Old Joe Clark." Play this through a few times and you'll find that even as a simple quarter note run it sounds pretty cool.

If you think back to how we were using the double thumb a while ago you will see that adding this rhythm tool here shouldn't be a big deal.

## Old Joe Clark *Double Thumb/Slide* 4/4 Time Key of G



Old Joe Clark's a fine old man I'll



tell you rea- son why he

I'm not going to tab out the whole arrangement for you because by now you should have a pretty good idea of where this is going.

Let's look at this with hammer-on's, pull-off's and a slide.

## Old Joe Clark *Hammer-on's/Pull-off's/Slide* 4/4 Time Key of G

Old Joe Clark's a fine old man I'll  
tell you rea- son why he

These are only two examples of what you can do inside the structure of this tune. The possibilities are literally endless. As long as the basic structure of the song stays intact you have free reign over what is played. The only limits here are your creativity and your fluency in the basic skills.

Let's revisit two of the different "Old Joe Clark" versions we looked at earlier.

### Example One

Old Joe Clark's a fine old man I'll

### Example Two

Old Joe Clark's a fine old man I'll

Now ask yourself if example one is really any different from example two.

Yes, example one is played with a basic frailing strum and example two is dressed up with hammer-on's and pull-off's, but the core of the song remains the same.

We can add as much window dressing as we want, but the structure of the song (rhythm, chord progression and melody) will not change.

In order to really understand the banjo, and music in general, you have to look deeper than random fretboard gymnastics. Everything has to balance out and work together.

Compare the hammer-on and double thumb versions of "Old Joe Clark". Both arrangements fit the words "Old Joe Clark's a fine old man", but they fit in different ways.



A particular moment may call for something with a lot of double thumbs or hammer-on's or it may only call for a simple frailing strum. It's the same as your speaking voice. Some situations call for you to speak slowly and others require that you to speak quickly. Sometimes we want to say a lot or we may wish sum up our thoughts with one or two words. We hardly ever make a distinction between the different ways we use our voices or phrase our sentences because we react to the moment without thinking. We never stop and say to ourselves, "now I have to sound happy" or "now I have to sound angry." What we feel is unconsciously reflected in what we say and how we say it.

It's the same with our music. Playing simply may at times have more impact than a lightning fast combination of licks. The trick is getting familiar enough with the instrument that your phrasing becomes completely natural. That's where jamming comes into play.

As you gain confidence playing at jam sessions start experimenting with melody lines and backup licks. Stay within the structure of the song, but find out for yourself just how much you can get away with. Explore how many ways you can phrase a pattern of notes without affecting the timing or missing the chord progression.

In the next chapter we are going to discuss how to find a melody line in a chord progression. Keep coming back to this chapter for ideas on how to shape melody lines to suit what you want to say and how you feel.

# Finding The Melody

Up to this point we have discussed chord progressions and ways to break up the frailing strum into different rhythms. Now it's time to talk about how to find a melody line in a chord progression. We have already covered how scales are constructed from the chromatic scale by following a series of whole and half steps. Now we are going to look at the relationship between scales and chord forms.

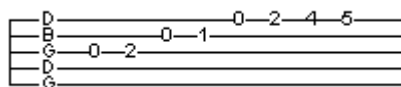
## Open Position Scales

Open position scales are built from chord forms that use open strings. In G tuning we have two major open position chord forms: G and C.



The G scale is one of the easiest to find on the banjo because we are tuned to an open G chord. Our root note is the open G string and we just walk across the strings until we end up on the G note on the first string at the fifth fret.

### Example One



This example shows a G scale.

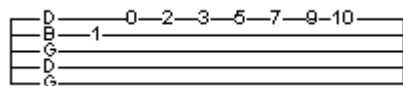


The C scale is a little bit more troublesome because we don't have access to a low C note. We could tune the fourth string to C, but if we did that we would have to retune every time we wanted to go back to the key of G.

Retuning just isn't practical in a jamming or performing situation. We don't want everything to stop so we can retune every time we play in a different key so we have to find a way to make the best of what's available in open G tuning.

Our first option to find a C scale is to start on the C note on the second string at the first fret.

### Example Two

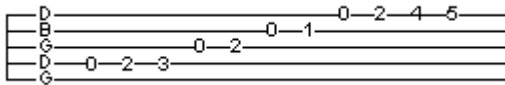


This example shows a C scale starting on the second string at the first fret. That will work, but it limits us to playing the melody on the first string.

The solution to the problem is to find a compromise. We don't have a low C note but we do have a low D note. All we have to is play a C scale starting on the second note.

Since we are starting the C scale on the first available note we might as well keep going through the available notes up to the G on the first string at the fifth fret and just treat the whole arrangement of notes as an extended scale.

## Example Three



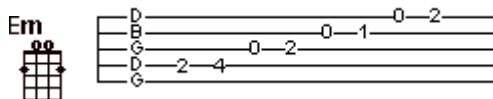
This sounds a little weird as a scale exercise, but it has the advantage of getting you familiar with the melody notes available in the key of C.

Every major scale has a unique number of sharps and flats. The key of C has no sharps or flats and the key of G has one sharp (F#.) The same rule applies to minor keys. Any minor key that has the same number of sharps and flats as a major key is the relative minor of that major key.

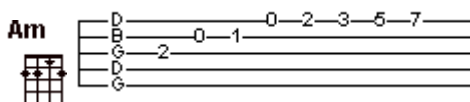
The key of Am has no sharps or flats. Therefore it is the relative minor of C. The key of Em has one sharp so it is the relative minor of G.

What all of that means is that because the G and C scales are available out of open position chord forms we also have access to the Em and Am scales.

## Em Scale



## Am Scale



## Closed Position Scales


Closed position scales are built from closed chord forms. The advantage to closed position scales is that you can move them up and down the fretboard. This gives you the ability to play any scale in any key.

The reason we can find a scale in any chord form really boils down to how chords are constructed. A major chord is made of the first, third and fifth notes of a scale. It just makes sense that the other scale notes would be within easy reach of those three notes.


Let's start with the A position:

## The A Position


**A**




**A#**




**B**




**C**



**C#**



**D**



The diagram illustrates the A position for the chromatic scale along the fretboard. It shows the fingerings for the A, A#, B, C, C#, and D positions. Each position is represented by a fretboard diagram and a corresponding scale pattern. The A position starts at fret 1, A# at fret 2, B at fret 2, C at fret 3, C# at fret 4, and D at fret 5. The scales are played in the A position, with the index finger on the first fret and the other fingers on subsequent frets.



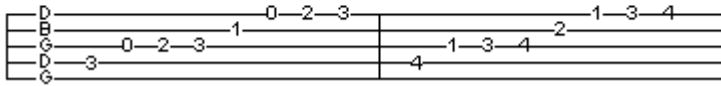
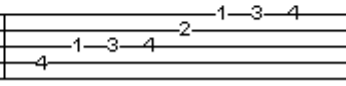


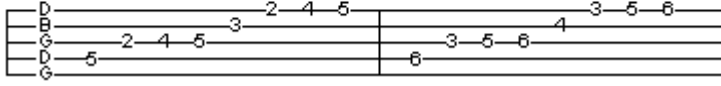
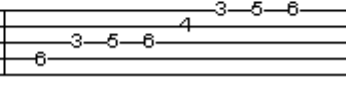


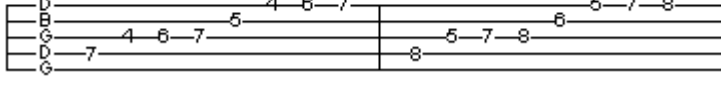
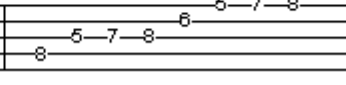
This follows the chromatic scale along the fretboard.

The fingering here might be a little tricky at first. One rule of thumb I use with scale patterns like these is to assign each finger to a fret. In other words, my index finger is at the first fret, my middle finger at the second fret, my ring finger at the third and my little finger works the fourth and the fifth frets. That lets me work fairly intricate patterns without getting my fingers tangled up.

Work slowly up and down the fretboard until you get comfortable with the pattern.

The next chord form we will look at is the F position.



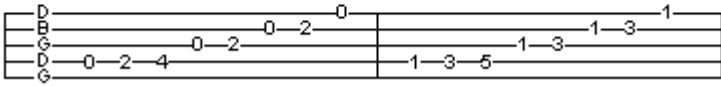
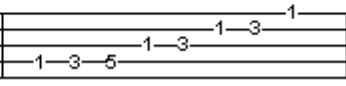


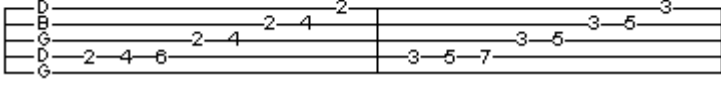
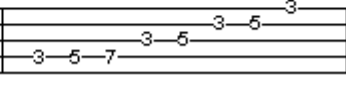


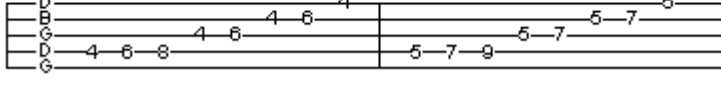
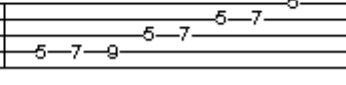
## The F Position

<b>F</b> 	<b>F#</b> 
	
<b>G</b> 	<b>G#</b> 
	
<b>A</b> 	<b>A#</b> 
	

As with the previous example this pattern continues down the fretboard following the chromatic scale.

Let's move on to the D position.

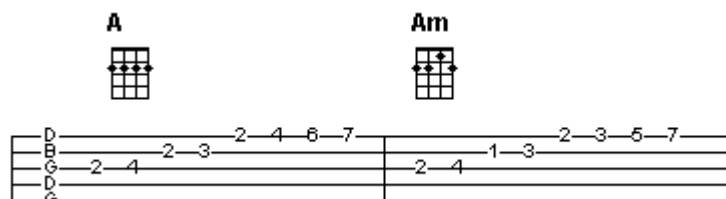
## The D Position

<b>D</b> 	<b>D#</b> 
	
<b>E</b> 	<b>F</b> 
	
<b>F#</b> 	<b>G</b> 
	

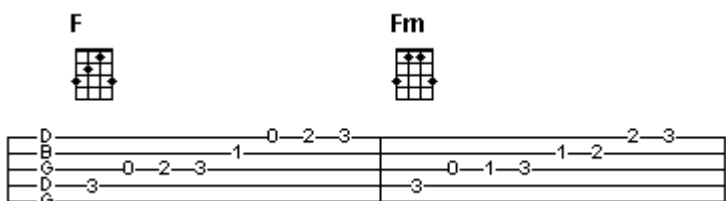
Each of these scale patterns can be converted to minor scales. Remember that the only difference between

a major and a minor scale is the sequence of whole and half steps dictated by the mode.

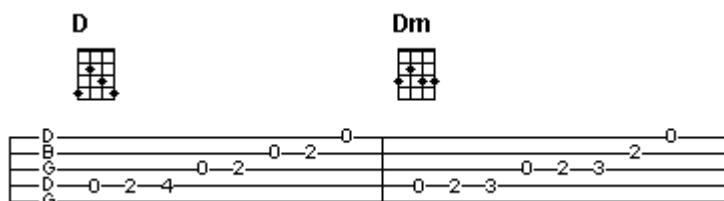
## A Position Major & Minor Scales



## F Position Major & Minor Scales



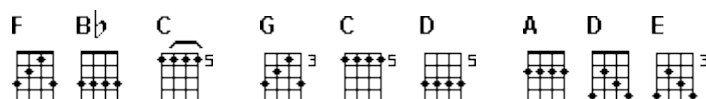
## D Position Major & Minor Scales



## Chord Patterns

Because scales and chords are tied to the chromatic scale our chord forms fall into patterns that follow the I-IV-V progression.

### Example One



In this example we have three combinations of chords with three chords in each group.

F-Bb-C is the I-IV-V progression in the key of F.

G-C-D is the I-IV-V progression in the key of G.

A-D-E is the I-IV-V progression in the key of E.

Now look at the three groups. We have an F position chord followed by two A position chords in a pattern.

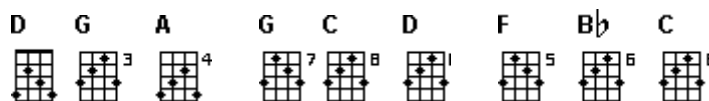
Do you see the pattern here?

Strum through each group of chords a few times.

That's right. Any F position chord anywhere on the fretboard is going to have the IV and V "A" position chords right below it.

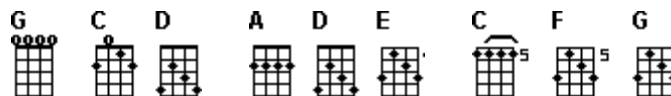
That's the F position. Now let's look at the D position.

## Example Two



D position chords follow a similar pattern to the F position chords illustrated in example one.

## Example Three



The A position works under the same principal as the other two positions.

Experiment with the various chord positions on your own and see what happens when you start adding minor chords into the mix.

Once you start getting a feel for these patterns you will be able to blend them together as you gain mastery of the fretboard.

## Other Scale Patterns And Modes

When you are comfortable with the movable scale patterns you can start exploring some different modes and variations of the major scale.

### The Blues Scale

The blues scale is a variation of the major scale.

I know that isn't much of a definition, but this is one of those musical ideas that has so much nonsense attached to it that it's real usefulness is kind of hard to visualize. When I was a kid most of the old guitar players I knew said it was good to use the blues scale as a guideline, but not as a separate scale.

The standard blues scale drops the second and sixth notes from the major scale and rearranges the scale to fit a pattern of 1- b3 - 4 - #4 - 5 - b7 - 8.

You play the first note of the scale, flat the third note, play the fourth note and then the fourth note sharpened. Follow that sharpened fourth note with the fifth note of the scale, a flattened seventh note and end it on the eighth note for the octave.

I use the blues scale as a guide for what I can get away with. If I'm playing melody in a standard scale I can use the blues scale to find a sharped fourth or a flat seventh to give it a little flavor.

How you use it is up to you, but do take a moment to figure out how your movable patterns can be converted into blues scales. It's good fretboard practice and it might come in handy later on.

## Pentatonic Scales

Pentatonic scales are like blues scales in that people like to dredge up the subject in conversation.

In the context of playing the banjo they can be useful for working up a more streamlined scale pattern.

To play a major pentatonic scale choose the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, & 8<sup>th</sup> notes of any major scale.

To play a minor pentatonic scale choose the 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> notes of any minor scale.

The result is a fairly compact moveable scale that might come in handy. Experiment with it and see what you can come up with.

## Modes

As I noted in an earlier chapter, major and minor scales are created by choosing a series of notes out of the chromatic scale in a pattern of whole and half steps. These whole and half steps are dictated by the mode you are working in.

Up to this point we have limited our discussion to major and minor modes. Now we are going to take a quick look at the whole and half step patterns in other modes.

Mode:	Steps						
<b>Ionian/Major</b>	1	1	1/2	1	1	1	1/2
<b>Mixolydian</b>	1	1	1/2	1	1	1/2	1
<b>Lydian</b>	1	1	1	1/2	1	1	1/2
<b>Dorian</b>	1	1/2	1	1	1	1/2	1
<b>Aeolian/Minor</b>	1	1/2	1	1	1/2	1	1
<b>Phrygian</b>	1/2	1	1	1	1/2	1	1
<b>locrian</b>	1/2	1	1	1/2	1	1	1

As you may have already noticed, the major and minor modes are also known as the Ionian and Aeolian modes.



The other modes are just ways to create a different series of notes in a scale. We've already been working in the Mixolydian mode because that's the mode "Old Joe Clark" is written in. If you play around with the whole and half steps listed above for the Major and Mixolydian modes you will see what I mean.

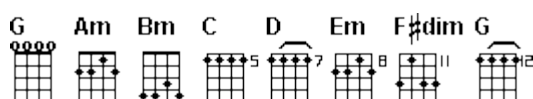
In Major mode for the key of G the seventh note is an F#. In Mixolydian mode the seventh note is an F natural.

You will be using modes all the time without realizing it and that's actually a good thing because you wind up with fewer details to remember. At the same time it's a good idea to get used to the sound of the different mode patterns even if it's only to develop your expertise with the fretboard.

## Chording The Scale

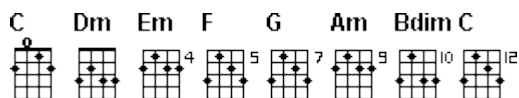
Another exercise you can experiment with is playing a scale up and down the neck by strumming each chord associated with the notes of a major scale.

### Example One



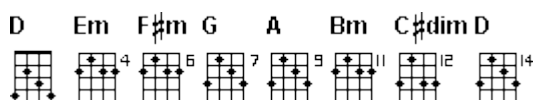
In this example we are playing a G scale starting with the open G chord and moving up the fretboard as we strum along the G major scale.

### Example Two



In this example we are strumming along a C major scale.

### Example Three



In this example we are strumming along a D major scale.

Compare this pattern of chord forms with example two and you will find that this is the same pattern starting at a different fret.

Can you see where I'm going with this? That's right. Even this exercise follows a specific pattern for each chord form. If you work up the F major scale chords on your own you will be able to play virtually any scale along the fretboard.

# Putting It All Together

This chapter was titled "Finding The Melody" so I guess you are wondering when and where melody lines are going to come into play here.

If you go back through the exercises in this chapter you will find that you have the tools at your disposal to find any melody in any key anywhere on the fretboard.

There isn't any magic involved in finding a melody line. If you know the key of the song in question all you have to do is experiment with a scale and you'll run into the melody without much trouble.

The problem is that melody is only part of the equation.

The real strength of frailing is its ability to present a melody line and a rhythmic backup in unison so in order to keep everything working we have to know how to find the melody and the chord progression at the same time.

That's one of the reasons I have put so much emphasis on getting out to jam sessions. Once you can follow a chord progression in a group setting the move to adding melody into the mix is an easy and natural next step because every melody note you need is either right in the chord or just a fret (or string) away.

As you get more and more comfortable with the flow of music you will find there is ample time in the space of a measure to explore the melodic and rhythmic possibilities in a given song.

The other factor here is playing and singing. If you start singing from the very beginning you will develop an intuitive feel for melody lines. This is crucial to presenting a song effectively and will make finding scale patterns and melody lines in chord progressions, once again, a logical next step.

Through all of this you have to keep the rhythm of the song churning along at a steady beat.

That's why we are not piling all of this on at once. We start simply with the basic strum and a couple of chords. Then we slowly add more and more "stuff" on top of that core skill set. We work at a pace that gives us time to become familiar with each task.

Practice the scale patterns in this chapter a little bit at a time between jam sessions. As you get more comfortable applying the basics start trying to find melody notes. Don't worry about playing just like another player or copying a specific arrangement. Focus on how the melody sounds.

When you find a melody line that works start experimenting with ways to phrase the melody. Add in a double thumb, pull-off, hammer-on or slide here and there to shape the rhythm to suit your own voice and vision.

When you can do that try the same song in a couple of other keys.

After a while you will be playing whatever variations you deem appropriate in any particular moment.

Let's close out this chapter by arranging and transposing a tune together.

For this example we'll work with an old tune called "Southern Aristocracy". It's an old minstrel tune that was probably played on banjos before the Civil War.

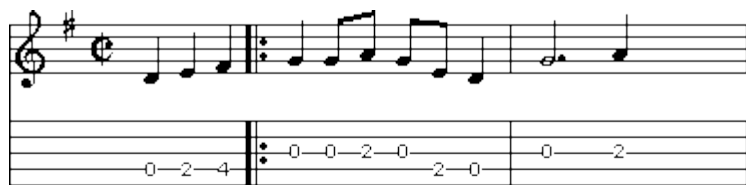
## Southern Aristocracy



Just in case you don't know how to read music\* I will tab out the notes for the A part of the tune for you.

This song is written here in the key of G in cut time. "Cut time" is a variation of 4/4 time. It is actually 2/2 time. The reason that it is called "cut time" is that the note values are cut in half.

## Southern Aristocracy A Part



\* There is a tutorial on reading music in my first book, "The How and the Tao of Old Time Banjo". It's available on our website at [www.pik-ware.com](http://www.pik-ware.com).

We have a melody line, now we have to figure out the chord progression.

We know the song is in the key of G so the odds are pretty good that the first chord we are going to play is G. Pluck through the first few measures while strumming a G chord. Does it sound okay? It does? Good. G it is then.

Now in the fifth measure we have a note being played on the fourth string at the second fret. That's a signal that there might be a chord change coming because that note is the bass note in a handful of chords. C, Am and Em all feature the fourth string at that fret.

Run through the notes before and after that single note on the fourth string. Try playing a C or Am there.

That doesn't sound right so we'll try an Em.

Yeah, that feels all right.

Keep working through the song that way and you'll wind up with a chord progression of G-Em-C-G-A-D.

The next thing you want to do is plunk out the melody line a few times so you can get used to it. Once you can hum the melody start chopping the chords while you "la-la" along.

Now start experimenting with the notes. Is a first-position C chord going to give you access to the melody notes you need to reach? Would that measure be easier to play at the fifth fret?

You have to ask yourself questions like this when you are working out a song. The notation or the tab isn't going to give you all the answers.

If you tinker with it for a while you might come up with something like our next example.

## Southern Aristocracy

The musical score for "Southern Aristocracy" is presented in a system of four staves. Each staff begins with a guitar chord diagram and a melody line. The chords are G, Em, C, and D. The melody line is written on a five-line staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes, with some measures containing rests. The guitar part is written on a six-line staff with fret numbers (0, 2, 4, 5) and a double bar line. The score is divided into four measures, each corresponding to a different chord.

**G**

**Em**

**C**

**D**

This is a pretty simple arrangement, but it illustrates how we can mix up the skills we have discussed into a chord progression to draw out a melody line.

If we wanted to transpose this song into another key we wouldn't have to go back to the sheet music. All we have to do is work out the same chord progression for the key of C.

## Southern Aristocracy

**C**



♩ ♩ ♩ ||: ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩



**C** **Am**



♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩



**F** **C**




♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩



**D** **G**



♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩



If you look at the G and C versions of "Southern Aristocracy" side by side you will notice that the melody and the structure of the song is the same, but there are some differences in how I phrased a couple of the measures.

The thing you have to keep in mind is that you have an almost endless number of options as to how any given song can be played. You don't have to play the melody note-for-note. If you are following the chord progression and rhythm of the song you can be creative when it comes to deciding how much or how little of the melody to mix in.

The really cool thing about frailing is that the strum weaving behind the song let's you *imply* parts of the melody. If you experiment with this a little bit you will find that if you give your listeners just enough melody to start humming along they will start to "fill in the blanks" on their own. As you get better at this you will find yourself playing fairly simple melody lines over the frailing strum but phrasing them in a way that convinces people you are playing something complicated.

In other words, you'll be having a greater impact with less effort.

Once you can play the A part of "Southern Aristocracy" in G and C go ahead and work out the B part of

the tune on your own. Then see if you can work the song out in other keys.

## 3/4 and 6/8 Time

We've covered 4/4 time pretty extensively up to this point. Now let's take a look at two other common time signatures you will run into on the banjo.

### 3/4 Time

In 3/4 time we are playing three notes to a measure with the quarter note getting the beat.

What that means is that your count is 1 2 3, 1 2 3.

That's it. Everything you worked with in 4/4 time stays the same but now we are working with a different count.

#### Example One



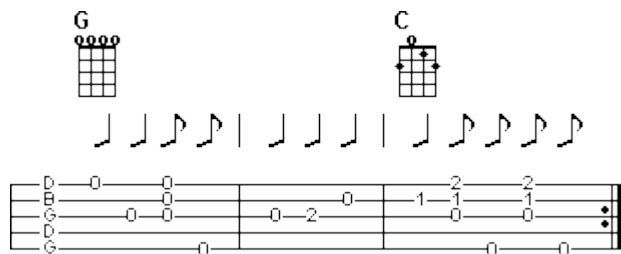
In this example we have the basic frailing pattern adapted to 3/4 time. We are playing a quarter note followed by two eighth note strum-thumbs.

The count is 1 2& 3&, 1 2& 3&.

Work with this pattern and give yourself some time to get used to the new rhythm.

As you get more comfortable you can start applying the ideas we discussed in the timing chapter for 4/4 time to the 3/4 count.

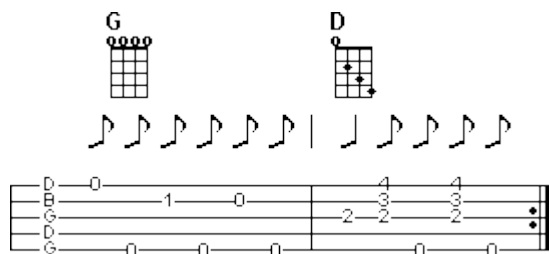
#### Example Two



In this example we are breaking up the measures in three four time the same way we did earlier in 4/4 time. In the first measure we are playing two quarter notes and two eighth notes. In the second measure we are playing three quarter notes. In the third measure we are playing a quarter note and four eighth notes.

The count is 1 2 3&, 1 2 3, 1 2& 3&.

## Example Three



In this example we are using the double thumb in the first measure and a basic frailing pattern over a D chord in the second measure.

The count is 1& 2& 3&, 1 2& 3&.

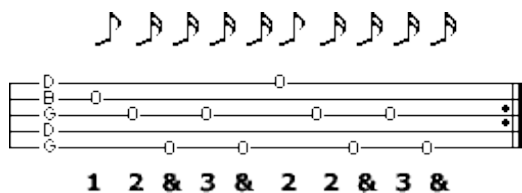
## 6/8 Time

In 6/8 time we are playing six eighth notes in every measure with the eighth note getting the beat. 6/8 is also a triplet time. That means that your eighth notes are in groups of three so you count for each measure is 1 2 3 2 2 3.

This is entirely different from 4/4 time where we are counting 1 2 3 4 in each measure. In 6/8 we are counting two three beat patterns in each measure.

Because of that, and because we are working with eighth notes rather than quarter notes, we can't effectively use the basic frailing strum in 6/8 time. We have to come up with something different.

## Example One



In this example we have a measure in 6/8 time. The note sequence is an eighth note followed by four sixteenth notes. A sixteenth note is one half the value of an eighth note so our count becomes 1 2& 3& 2 2& 3&.

I am using sixteenth notes here because it helps to put the emphasis on the first eighth note in each group of three. Just running six eighth notes right off the bat would make it difficult to get the feel of this rhythm pattern.

This is another pattern where practicing with the proper picking hand technique really pays off. The sixteenth notes just don't leave you any time to fish around for a string.

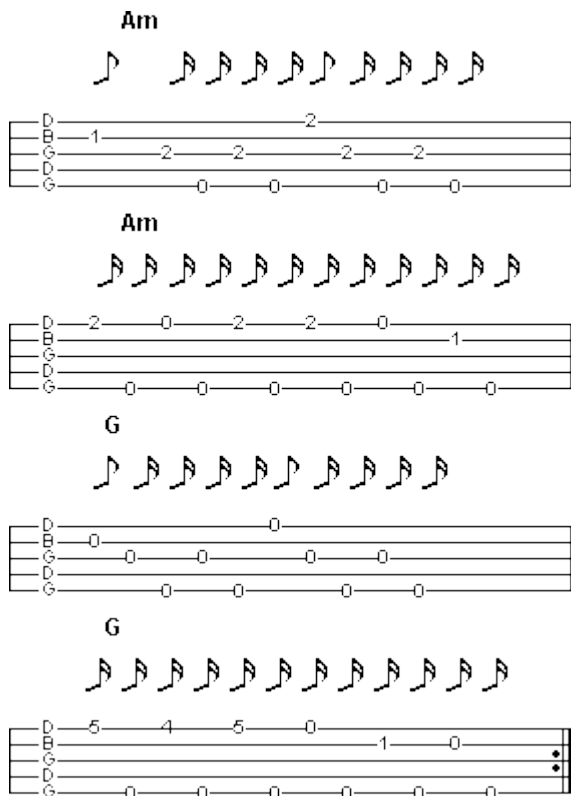


## Example Two



In this example we have changed the pattern into a run of twelve sixteenth notes. The count is 1& 2& 3& 2& 2& 3&.

## Example Three



In example three we have a chord progression made up of two measures of Am and two measures of G.

The count for example three is 1 2& 3& 2 2& 3& in the first measure, 1& 2& 3& 2& 2& 3& in the second measure,

1 2& 3& 2 2& 3& in the third measure and 1& 2& 3& 2& 2& 3& in the fourth measure.

The one thing about frailing in 6/8 time is that there usually isn't much room for the kind of timing tricks we can employ in 4/4 and 3/4 time. A hammer-on in a run of sixteenth notes is going to result in two thirty-second notes. It's possible, but your timing has to be dead on to make it work.

One little trick you can use to help you keep track of tunes in 6/8 time is to "McTavish" the beat.

A lot of 6/8 time tunes like "Irish Washerwoman," the B part of "Garryowen," or even example three on the last page have a rhythm that fits this little bit of verse:

McTavish is dead and his brother don't know it.

His brother is dead and McTavish don't know it.  
There's two Irish guys lying in bed,  
neither one knows that the other one's dead.

Okay, it's slightly warped, but that little poem has helped me phrase out some pretty complicated 6/8 tunes. It won't work for everything, but it has gotten me out of some tight spots in jams where a lot of Irish music was being played.

On a completely unrelated note, you can sing almost every poem written by Emily Dickinson to the tune of "Yellow Rose of Texas".

## Drop Thumb

Drop thumb is probably the most talked about technique in old time banjo, but it's also the most misunderstood. People make a lot of fuss about drop thumb and the simple fact of the matter is that it's nothing more than another way to break a note in half and turn the basic frailing strum into a string of eighth notes.

### Example One



In this example we have a measure with two basic frailing strums followed by a measure of drop thumb.

Here's what's going on: when you play a drop thumb you are striking a string, in this case the first, with your middle fingernail and then swinging your thumb down to pluck another string. In this case we are thumbing the second string.

After the thumb note we strike with the middle fingernail again and follow that up with the thumb on the fifth string.

This gives you a string of eighth notes.

The count for this example is 1 2& 3 4&, 1& 2& 3& 4&.

### Example Two



The drop thumb isn't limited to any particular string. In the second measure you will notice that we are playing the first and *third* strings.

The count is 1& 2& 3& 4&, 1& 2& 3& 4&.

## Example Three



In this example we are changing the drop thumb slightly by playing a brush-strum after the thumb note.

The count is 1& 2& 3& 4&, 1& 2& 3& 4&.

This is a good technique to know and it has it's uses, but don't believe all of the hype surrounding the drop thumb.

This technique looks cool in action but it has a nasty way of throwing your right hand rhythm completely out of whack. That's why we recommend fretting hand techniques (slides, hammer-on's and pull-off's) or picking hand techniques like double thumbing to play eighth notes. You can apply those techniques without breaking the stream of the rhythm. Drop thumb almost always throws off the rhythm unless you have trulys mastered your right hand technique.

It's not a *bad* technique just use it judiciously.

# Bluegrass & Blues

Let's take a quick look at how to adapt old time frailing banjo for music that it's not usually associated with.

## Bluegrass

While bluegrass banjo is normally played with three-finger picking the frailing strum can be easily adapted to a bluegrass setting. The only trick is to keep the feeling of a stream of eighth notes rolling through the tune.

### Example One

The musical notation for Example One consists of two measures. The first measure begins with a G chord diagram (open strings). The notation shows a series of eighth notes on the fifth line (G) and fourth line (F), with a hammer-on (H) on the fourth line. The second measure begins with a C7 chord diagram (first fret). The notation shows a series of eighth notes on the third line (G) and second line (F), with a phantom (P) and a hammer-on (H) on the second line. The notation includes a five-line staff with various notes, rests, and fingerings (1, 2, 3) and techniques (H for hammer-on, P for phantom).

In this example we are mixing a few standard bluegrass elements together. In the first measure we are playing a frailing variation of the "Foggy Mountain" roll. In the second measure we are playing a phantom and then a standard hammer-on in a C7 chord.

In the third measure we are playing the third and fourth strings at the third fret. If you go back to the instruction on the blues scale earlier in this book you will find that the pattern in this measure is playing with the "flat third" of the blues scale.

The licks in the second and third measures are pretty typical of how bluegrass musicians create a feeling of drive and tension in their solos. The seventh chord and the flat third fit the flow of the song like a western saddle on a goat, but mixing those clashing notes into the flow of the picking pattern creates a feeling of tension that gives the other notes in the break a sense of urgency.

The count for this example is pretty straightforward, but the phrasing of the measures can be tricky. To really make this work you are going to have to spend some time listening to and jamming with bluegrass musicians.

## Example Two

On the next page I have put together a complete "fake" bluegrass tune for you that blends several standard bluegrass elements into something that sounds kind of cool.

Use this as something to experiment with. When you find yourself jamming with a three-finger player you can mix in bits and pieces of this example as you see fit. Remember, the only thing separating bluegrass and old time banjo is the physical technique used to strike the strings. You'll be surprised at how much you can learn from players not connected with old time banjo or old time music.

**G**

**G** **G7**

**C** **C7**

**C**

**D** **G**

**G**

## The Blues

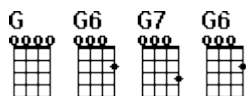
Covering all the possibilities of just the general idea of "blues banjo" would fill more than one book. What we are going to do here is look at a handful of ideas to get your creative juices flowing.

## Boogie Chord Progression

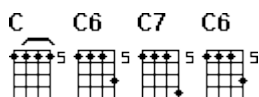
A typical blues chord progression, sometimes called the "boogie progression", involves playing a pattern of major, sixth and seventh chords tied together with a turnaround.

This is easy but it sounds really cool.

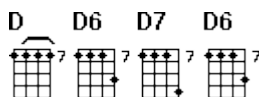
The first step is to strum each of the chords diagrammed below. We have a G, G6, G7 and another G6. Just strum them one time each.



After the G progression we move up the neck to C. Once again, just strum each of these chords once.



And then we move up to D.



Now that we know the chord forms involved, let's put together a boogie chord progression.

1. Strum through the G, G6, G7 and C6 chords twice. Play this as a quarter note strum. In other words, each strum is counted for one beat.
2. Strum through the C, C6, C7, C6 chords twice while keeping the quarter note strum.
3. Strum through the G, G6, G7 and C6 chords twice.
4. Strum through the D, D6, D7, D6 chord once.
5. Strum through the C, C6, C7, C6 chords once.
6. Strum through the G, G6, G7 and C6 chords twice.

Like I said, this is pretty easy, but it does sound kind of cool.

Let's look at the structure of this progression. Since we are playing it in the key of G our I chord is G, our IV chord is C and our V chord is D:

```
I  I6 I7 I6 | I  I6 I7 I6
IV IV6 IV7 IV6 | IV IV6 IV7 IV6
I  I6 I7 I6 | I  I6 I7 I6
V  V6 V7 V6 | IV IV6 IV7 IV6
I  I6 I7 I6 | I  I6 I7 I6
```

Once you get used to the sound of this try it in a couple of other keys before we look at adding in a turnaround.

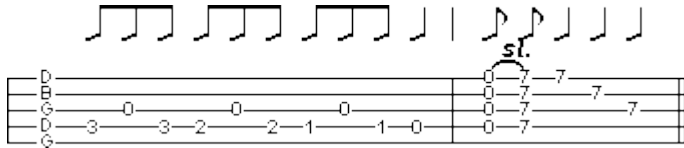
## Turnarounds

A turnaround does just that. It turns a chord progression around and leads you back to the first line of the next verse or chorus.

To play turnarounds we have to use triplets. A triplet is where you play three notes in the space of two.



## Example One



In this turnaround we are walking up the fourth string and then sliding down to the D chord at the seventh fret. After the measure of D you just pick back up at the beginning on G.

You can pluck this out with your thumb, your middle fingernail or play it as a drop thumb pattern.

The count is 1& 2& 3& 4, 1& 2 3 4.

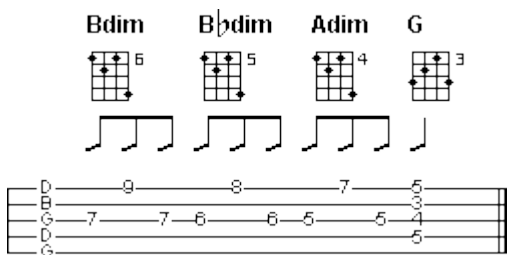
## Example Two



This works along the same lines as example one, but now we are walking up the third string.

The count is 1& 2& 3& 4, 1& 2 3 4.

## Example Three



In this example we are playing diminished chords down the deck. The progression of B diminished, Bb diminished and A diminished leads you down to the G chord.

This is a pattern that will work anywhere on the fretboard and it turns up in all kinds of great blues music. Eric Clapton uses this same pattern in the songs, "Keys To The Highway" with BB King on the "Riding With The King" album.

Once you are comfortable with a couple of turnarounds try mixing one into the boogie chord progression.

I I6 I7 I6 | I I6 I7 I6  
 IV IV6 IV7 IV6 | IV IV6 IV7 IV6  
 I I6 I7 I6 | I I6 I7 I6  
 V V6 V7 V6 | IV IV6 IV7 IV6  
 TURNAROUND | I I6 I7 I6

Once you can play this through with quarter note strums try blending in the frailing strum. You can use this progression for songs like "Bright Lights, Big City," "Sweet Home Chicago" and many more.

## Delta Blues

One of my favorite blues guitar players is the late, great Son House. That slide guitar sound still blows me away whenever I toss one of his CD's into my stereo. In fact, I like it so much that I started mixing it into my banjo playing.

Here's the deal, most slide guitar players work out of open tunings and as a result a lot of their techniques can be used on the banjo.

### Example One



In this example we are playing a lick right out of Son House's bag of tricks.

It starts out with a simple basic frailing pattern and in the last measure we have a slide lick. For the slide we are strumming across the open strings, hammering-on at the second fret, sliding to the third fret and then pulling-off the third fret.

You can play this slide lick with your finger or you can pick up a guitar slide and play it bottleneck style.

The count is 1 2& 3 4&, 1 2& 3& 4&.



## Example Two

If you like the sound of the lick in example one why not put it to work? Let's take a look at a complete slide banjo solo in the style of what Son House was playing.

## Banjo Blues 4/4 Time Key of G

Start off by playing the lick in **Example One** three times and then go into the slide from the third fret to the fifth fret:

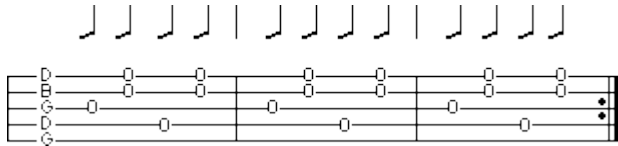
The musical notation is presented in 10 systems, each consisting of a rhythmic staff (top) and a guitar-style fretboard diagram (bottom). The notation is for a Banjo Blues solo in 4/4 time, Key of G.

- System 1:** Rhythmic staff shows eighth and quarter notes. Fretboard diagram shows a slide from the 3rd fret to the 5th fret, indicated by "st." and fret numbers 3, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5.
- System 2:** Rhythmic staff shows eighth and quarter notes. Fretboard diagram shows fret numbers 3, 3, 3, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0. A "P H" (pull and hammer-on) instruction is shown above the 3rd fret.
- System 3:** Rhythmic staff shows eighth and quarter notes. Fretboard diagram shows fret numbers 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0. A "H" (hammer-on) instruction is shown above the 0th fret.
- System 4:** Rhythmic staff shows eighth and quarter notes. Fretboard diagram shows fret numbers 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0. A "P H" (pull and hammer-on) instruction is shown above the 3rd fret.
- System 5:** Rhythmic staff shows eighth and quarter notes. Fretboard diagram shows fret numbers 0, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7. A "st." (slide) instruction is shown above the 0th fret.
- System 6:** Rhythmic staff shows eighth and quarter notes. Fretboard diagram shows fret numbers 7, 7, 7, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5.
- System 7:** Rhythmic staff shows eighth and quarter notes. Fretboard diagram shows fret numbers 7, 7, 7, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5.
- System 8:** Rhythmic staff shows eighth and quarter notes. Fretboard diagram shows fret numbers 3, 3, 3, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0. A "P H" (pull and hammer-on) instruction is shown above the 3rd fret.
- System 9:** Rhythmic staff shows eighth and quarter notes. Fretboard diagram shows fret numbers 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0. A "H" (hammer-on) instruction is shown above the 0th fret.
- System 10:** Rhythmic staff shows eighth and quarter notes. Fretboard diagram shows fret numbers 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0. A "P H" (pull and hammer-on) instruction is shown above the 3rd fret. The system ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

# Gus Cannon

We can't talk about blues banjo without mentioning Gus Cannon. Cannon's Jug Stompers was one of the all time great jug bands in the roaring twenties and Gus was a bona-fide blues banjo player.

Gus Cannon played fingerstyle banjo in a pattern that was something like the tab below.



In this tab we are playing the third and fourth strings with our thumb and picking up on the first and second strings with our index and middle fingers.

The count is 1 2 3 4, 1 2 3 4.

Nothing to it, right?

Now try working out a simple backup for the song "Minglewood Blues."

## Minglewood Blues

I  
Don't you never let one woman rule your mind  
IV V  
Don't you never let one woman rule your mind  
V I  
Said she keep you worried, troubled all the time

Don't you think your fair gal was little and cute like mine  
Don't you wish your fair gal was little and cute like mine  
She's a married woman, But she comes to see me all the time

Well I got a letter mama and you ought to hear it read  
Well I got a letter Lord and you ought to hear it read  
If you comin' back baby now be on your way

I was born in the desert, raised in a lion's den  
I was born in the desert, raised in a lion's den  
My number one occupation, stealing women from their money men

If you're ever in Memphis, better stop by Minglewood  
If you're ever in Memphis, better stop by Minglewood  
the women down there, they don't mean a man no good

Once in a while Gus would throw a lick into the song to dress things up. It's usually something along the lines of the example below.

The first example shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes: | eighth | eighth | eighth | eighth | | eighth | eighth | eighth | eighth | | eighth | eighth | eighth | eighth |. Below it is a fretboard diagram for a 4-string banjo (D, B, G, G). The fretting is: D5, B5, G5, G2 | D0, B0, G0, G0 | D2, B3, G4, G3.

The second example shows a rhythmic pattern: | eighth | eighth | eighth | eighth | | eighth | eighth | eighth | eighth | | eighth | eighth | eighth | eighth |. Below it is a fretboard diagram for a 4-string banjo (D, B, G, G). The fretting is: D2, B3, G2, D0 | **st.** D0, B0, G0, G0 | D0, B0, G0, G0.

Try mixing that into "Minglewood Blues" and see what you can come up with. Keep in mind that you don't have to fingerpick this tune. Go ahead and see what happens when you use the frailing strum.

Have some fun mixing up the ideas in this chapter. See what you can come up with. You might wind up inventing a new style of banjo!

# **Walking The Walk, Talking the talk**

## **Teaching**

One of the best things you can do to help yourself learn the banjo is to teach someone else.

As soon as you can play the basic frailing strum start showing your friends how to do it. By studying a task in order to find a way to explain it to somebody you wind up with a deeper understanding of the subject.

The more you teach, the more you know.

That's kind of cool when you think about it.

When you do start teaching, don't try to over-explain things. It's a mistake to give somebody all the answers. A good teacher isn't concerned with the right answer. The real magic of teaching is getting a student to ask the right questions.

## **Improvising**

The only trick to improvising is to stop making a big deal about improvising.

In this book you have been presented with the basic skills and building blocks to make great music. Go use them.

Improvising isn't a magic trick. Improvising is nothing more than a constant string of creative compromises. You start to play a song and you work with the notes, chords and rhythm as you go along.

That's why they call it improvising.

## **Stage Presence**

When you start to play for and with people it helps to develop some stage presence. The easiest way to have stage presence is to be yourself.

Speak to your audience directly, honestly and from the heart. Be proud of yourself. Not prideful, proud. Stand up straight. You don't have to dress up, but it helps to at least look like you care a little bit about the people looking at you.

Do your job and then get off the stage.

## **Moving On To The Next Level**

I get asked all the time, "How do I take my playing to the next level?"

I hate to tell you this, but when you're really ready you won't have to ask anybody for directions.

I'm not just being smart here, it's important that you understand this. Sometimes we worry so much about improving that we lock ourselves up and stop making any progress at all.

Today you play this way.

Tomorrow you may play another way.

The only important thing is that you are playing.

Give yourself time to grow, and be aware that if you look too far ahead you won't see the wonderful things in front of you right now.

## **Dealing With The Fifth String**

People think that the fifth string is a problem when it comes to playing in keys other than G or C, but that isn't exactly true. All you have to do is tune or capo the fifth string to match the root, third or fifth note of your "I chord".

## **Alternate Tunings**

I hardly ever use alternate tunings for the banjo. I really can't stand playing with people who have to retune every time the music moves to another key.

If you want to use an alternate tuning that's cool, just keep in mind that no matter what you tune the strings to the fretboard is still going to follow the chromatic scale. What that means is that everything we have covered here from scale patterns to movable chord forms can be applied to any tuning. The fingerings will change, but rules like the sequence of whole and half notes that build major or minor scales stay the same.

This isn't just true on the banjo. It will work on any fretted instrument. Go work out a scale on a guitar or a mandolin. They are different instruments with different tunings, but they all work under the same system.

Learn one thing and you learn ten thousand things.

## **Learning Tunes In three Easy Steps**

1. Figure out the rhythm.
2. Identify the key and chord progression.
3. Start playing along.

That's all there is to it. Any stylistic preferences you bring into the game will just gum up the works.

# Why I Play The Banjo

We've talked about a lot of technical music stuff in this book, but to wrap things up I think we need to kick back for a moment while I tell you a story.

Hey, it wouldn't be a book by Patrick Costello without at least one story now would it?

I was just a teenager when I had my first epileptic seizure. I don't remember the seizure itself. All I know is that I was eating French toast watching television one moment and the next thing I knew I was being rolled through a CAT scan. To say it was a terrifying experience would be understating it more than a little a bit.

It was almost a full day before anybody got around to telling me what was going on. I was sitting in a hospital bed hooked up to an IV when this doctor strolled in and informed me that I was an epileptic. I'll never forget the disinterested way he said it. He could have just as easily been informing me that I had a soup stain on my tie.

He hung around long enough to knock off a list of things I was never going to be able to do. He also informed me that I was going to be on medication for the rest of my life. He was wrong on all counts. Then he wandered off before I could ask a single question.

I thought that there was somebody in the next bed, but the blinds were closed so I couldn't see him. In fact, I didn't even know for sure if anybody was over there until the doctor was leaving and I heard this guy on the other side of the curtain cursing. I was too confused to pay much attention.

I just sat there by myself for a while until my folks came in to see me. We didn't talk about what was going on that much because we really didn't know for sure what was happening. Dear Old Dad brought my banjo and stuck it in the corner but I wasn't in the mood to play.

Later that day one of the priests from our parish came in to see me. He was just as distant and as preoccupied as the doctor had been. Somewhere in the middle of his spiel he blurted out that God was punishing me.

He never said what he thought I was being punished for because he never got the chance. The curtain around the next bed flew open and there was this really big guy cursing and screaming at the priest to get out.

I thought I was flipping out again. Between the shock over what the priest had said and the sight of that very angry, very big dude thrashing around all I could really do was just sit there and watch the show unfold.

The thing I'll never forget about the big guy was his tattoos. Back in the early eighties you didn't see too many people in my hometown with that much ink on their skin. His arms were covered with spider webs, flames and dancing skeletons in so many colors that my eyes had a hard time taking them all in. He was the living image of an outlaw biker from a B-movie.

So there I was with this goofy priest on one side and the illustrated man on the other side when I finally

realized what the big guy was so upset about.

He yelled at the priest about my visit from the doctor and that I was just a kid and the last thing I needed to hear was any kind of guilt trip. He said a bunch of other stuff that really can't be printed here, but he basically gave the good father the choice of leaving or getting his fanny kicked up between his shoulder blades. The priest did the smart thing and left.

After the big guy calmed down he said a few things about how much my current situation sucked but that it wasn't my fault. Then he tossed me a pack of cigarettes and a couple of dirty magazines and went back to sleep.

I was still in a blue funk the next morning and through most of the day. The biker dude got sick of watching me sit there and mope so he tried to give me a pep talk, but I wasn't buying it. I was pretty much convinced that my life was over.

Finally he told me to get out of bed and go do something. I asked him what exactly he had in mind (I'm editing the language here pretty heavily, folks) and he pointed to my banjo case and suggested that I go play a few songs.

Then he said something I'll never forget. "Maybe that's why your old man brought it here. Maybe he's trying to tell you something."

So I put on my robe and walked out into the hall carrying my banjo and dragging an IV stand.

I wound up spending the day going from room to room playing the handful of songs I knew. At first I felt like an idiot walking up to strangers in a hospital trying to play the banjo with a tube sticking out of my arm, but after the first couple of visits something started to happen.

People were welcoming me with open arms. It was like, "Hey! The banjo's here!" and the patients that I visited fussed over me like a member of the family. I played the banjo and sang songs like "You Are My Sunshine". After listening and signing along for a while they would start talking.

They talked about anything and everything you could imagine. What they were afraid of, what they were dealing with and what they had done right and done wrong. It hit me that the music (not just the banjo, but the act of making and sharing music) was creating some sort of a connection with the folks I was visiting. They saw the banjo and found an opportunity for something. It's hard to say what that something was because it was different for everybody I met that day. Some of them made me laugh and some of them cried on my shoulder. A couple of times I had family members stop me on the way out the door for a hug. People kept thanking me like what I was doing was some kind of a big deal and it took me a little while to realize that, to them, it *was* a big deal.

Someone had simply cared enough to show up. Somebody had come along with a smile and a couple of old folk songs to let them know that they weren't alone. I was reaching people. I was making a difference, however small, in the lives of the people I was meeting.

I was also finding out that I had something I could share. I wasn't useless. I had this banjo and I could use it to brighten my corner of the world even if only for the space of a few tunes.

By the time I wandered back to my room I knew what I was going to do with my life.

As I said earlier, we have discussed a lot of technical material in this book. I don't want you walking away from this thinking that technique is the only thing involved here.

We work in a heartbreakingly transient medium. When a song is over it's gone. We can play the same song over and over again but because of the variables involved we can never truly play a song exactly the same way twice.

With that in mind a "perfect" performance really doesn't mean much. Nobody is ever going to remember if you play every note in a banjo solo with lightning speed or accuracy. People will hear it, say, "That's nice" and immediately forget about it.

What people *will* remember is a feeling of connection with the musician. If all you can do is change a couple of chords and sing "Skip To My Lou" you can walk out your front door today and start singing for and with people. By the end of the week your hometown will be abuzz about how well you play.

A master banjo player isn't the person who can pick the most notes. It's the person who can touch the most hearts.



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